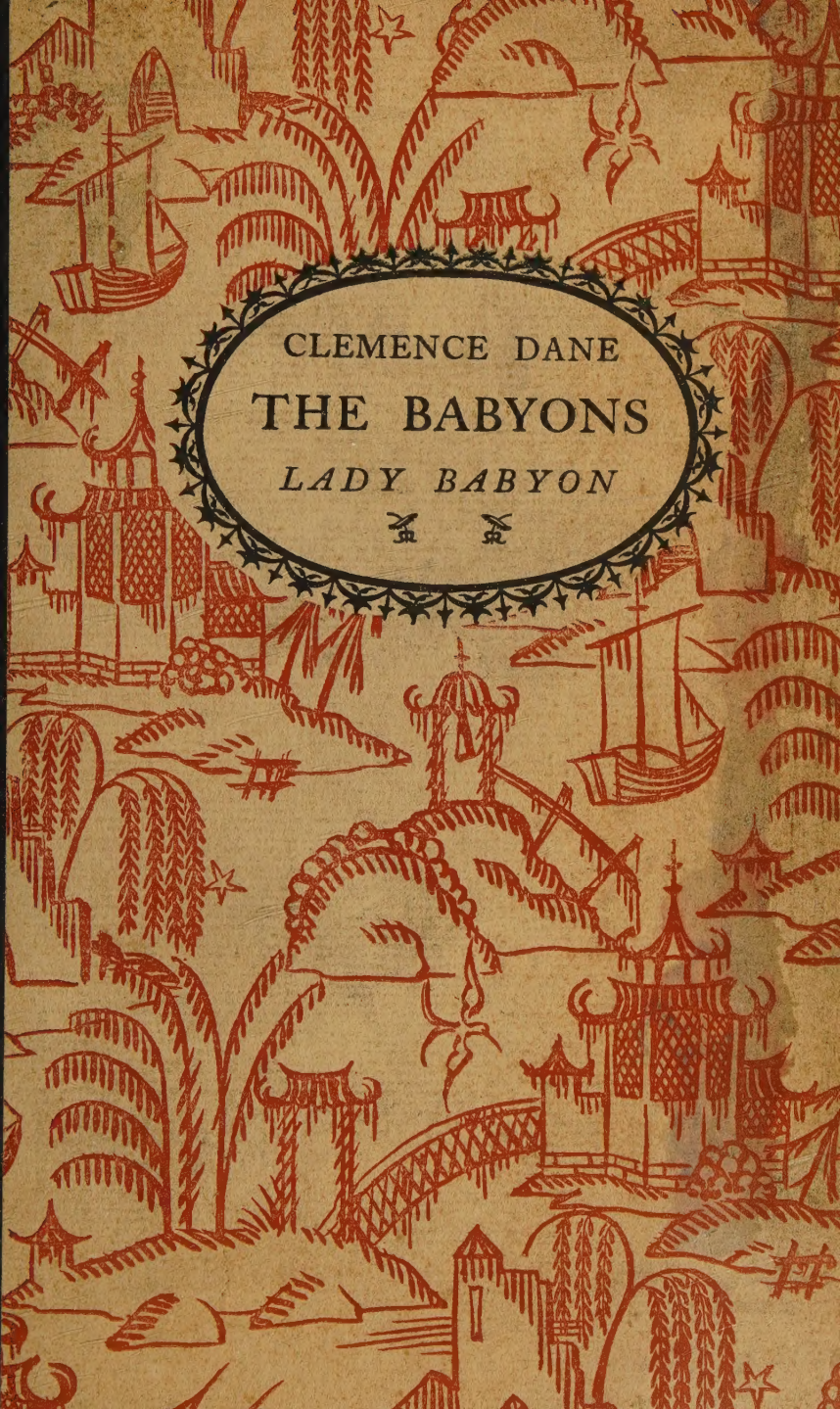
CLEMENCE DANE
THE BABYONS
LADY BABYON

LADY
BABYON

THE BABYONS

THE CHRONICLE

OF A

FAMILY

BY

CLEMENCE DANE

•

THIRD PERSON SINGULAR

MIDSUMMER MEN

CREEPING JENNY

LADY BABYON

LADY BABYON

•

EDWARDIAN

GARDEN CITY:
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FIRST EDITION

LADY
BABYON

'Intreat me not to leave thee . . . thy people shall be my people——'

Ruth.

LADY BABYON

I

ANTONINA DRURY came from a class that made its new dress at the dining-room table all the morning, pushed back the sewing-machine to half lay for lunch, and continued sewing in a hot-cheeked hurry till four o'clock. There would then be a quick change into the dress, finished except for hooks and eyes, in order to receive the first callers in the drawing-room, which had vases of cornflowers and gypsophila on the mantelpiece, photographs of relatives and professional beauties on the grand piano, and upon the sky-blue walls wedding groups and water-colours of Vesuvius by day and by night, in gilt mounts and gold frames.

Antonina was an original member of the first High School of the suburb, though she did not distinguish herself by desiring to play hockey or go to Girton. Instead she painted nicely, read, acted *Rosalind* in the school theatricals, was 'finished' in Paris and Hanover, and be-

cause her parents were dead and her guardians did not quite know what to do with her, was allowed to spend a year in an Italian family, where she was taught to read Dante, and read d'Annunzio to herself. She returned, at twenty, to the uncle and aunt and pleasant cousins who had given her a home. She settled down to be happy, to practise her music, join a circulating library, fritter her handsome dress allowance on books, gifts, pokerwork and beggars, make her own dresses extremely well, and think about getting married some day. She knew that she must get married, but she did not quite know how it was to be managed. However, she listened to her elder cousins' talk of love and lovers, and carefully watching their ways with their admirers, tried to reproduce them. But though she was energetic and conscientious in her dealings with the well-dressed youths whom her aunt's tactics assigned her or her own good looks attracted, she could not help admitting to herself that she found flirtation dull work. Indeed, as she talked about the pictures in the Vatican and never afforded her partners an opportunity of kissing her between dances, she had so little success that her aunt at last talked to her seriously about her selfishness. Was she selfish? cried Nina, shocked but deeply interested. Certainly she was selfish. It was selfish not to find out what a man's hobbies were, and talk of them to him—golf now, or musical comedy, or motor-cars. "But really, to talk to a man about the *Inferno*—yes, you did, my dear, your cousin heard you: it makes you sound eccentric. If you must talk books, why don't you talk about Kipling? Men like Kipling. *Kim*, now! That's the sort of book to talk about. What? What does it matter if you've read him or not? The thing is to keep a man amused. How can you expect to get married if you won't be entertaining? Men hate a woman to talk about herself—so selfish. But you, you talk to them in that forward way as if you were on an equality—no man will stand it, my love."

Antonina had never seen her aunt so roused: and half

sullen, half penitent, she promised her not to be selfish; but to try very hard to learn the art of pleasing men.

She did try. She spent hours dressing her hair in puffs over a high pad: she pulled her stay-laces till running upstairs was difficult: she practised her waltzing: she sat on the stairs at dances: once, in a curtained recess, she smoked a cigarette. But though she tried hard for two years to learn her lessons, she did not get married: and if she had not been an affectionate creature with a hearty admiration for her fashionable cousins, she might have carried a sore heart under her smart blouses with the deep pouch at the waist, high neck, and bell sleeves that would get into everything when she passed a plate. Now her cousins' sleeves, as her aunt pointed out, never got into anything! and men did so dislike an untidy woman! And then Antonina would be told the story once more of the girl who lost her lover because, as she ran upstairs one day in front of him, he saw a pink hole in the heel of her black stocking. "You see, Nina dear, men notice little things so!"

"I hate men," said Antonina.

But though she thought that she hated men, and Campbell-Bannerman, and darning stockings, and the Boers, and *Sesame and Lilies*, and getting up in the morning, and Queen Elizabeth, and fat bacon, Antonina had no notion of the meaning of the word hate. She was tactless and outspoken, and so she made more enemies than her cousins; but she was always vastly astonished when anybody misinterpreted her actions or resented her words: and where she found herself hurting she was eager to apologise, for she could not bear to be at odds with any one. Indeed, if she had not had two older cousins and a pretty younger one she might have achieved a modified popularity, for she had an amusing tongue; but they did everything so much better than she did and knew so much more of the world, that her tongue was tied in their house. As her aunt constantly said in front of her—"It's a pity Nina's so shy: men do hate having to make conversation."

Yet it was Antonina's shyness that in the end so magnified Antonina that her cousins bowed down to her before she was twenty-three like the stars of Joseph's dream. For Eva married a shipbroker's clerk and had four bridesmaids in pink: and Ethel married an alderman and had four bridesmaids and a page in blue: and Gladys married a wealthy Hong-Kong merchant and had six bridesmaids in six colours; while Antonina was married by special license, though without any bridesmaids at all, to a real live baronet, and went affectionately, with occasional letters and scrupulous observance of Christmas and birthdays, out of her cousins' lives for ever.

"Dear Nina!" said her aunt: "We don't see as much of her as we'ld like, buried away like that in Devonshire. Not that she ever forgets us: I had a letter only this morning. But it's strange how you can have a girl with you for seven years and train her up as if you were her mother, and she marries and where's your influence then? Love's labour lost, I call it!" said Antonina's aunt.

But Antonina's aunt could have spared her regrets. It is easier for a girl of sixteen to be influenced than it is for a woman of twenty-three to shake the influence off. The years in the pleasant rich suburb hampered Antonina in her mature life, just as her health for years was hampered by the tight lacing she had practised for a year or two. Never would her mind entirely forget its cramping any more than her body would forget it; which was a pity, for Antonina married for love, and in the home her husband gave her never hankered for the home she had left.

Her aunt and cousins had agreed, when Sir Nicholas Babyon made his formal visit to them, that seeing Antonina's fiancé made the whole business more natural. If he had been young and handsome you would have wondered that Nina was able to catch him. But after all, though he was very distinguished looking, he was oldish —forty-five at least—fifty more like. But Nina always did get on with older men. "She manages Sir Nicholas very

well, I say—quiet with him, you know—men like that. Well, good luck to her, dear Nina—dear impulsive Nina with all her little faults! And I'm very glad she likes him, though he's not the sort of man I'ld care to marry—difficult to talk to—he terrified Eva—she didn't open her mouth all through dinner except to eat, and you know what a flow Eva has as a rule. No, except for the title, he's not the sort of man I'ld care to marry. As Eva said, you could never call your soul your own."

But Nicholas Babyon was the sort of man that Nina wanted to marry: and she didn't want to call her soul her own. She wanted a husband who would call it his—would say—"Mine—mine—mine!" to her inexperienced soul. And during their brief courtship she fancied that she had heard Nicholas crying "Mine!"

Their meeting had been pure chance. She had been invited to stay with a friend of her Italian schooldays who lived in Dorset: and because *Persuasion* was Antonina's favourite book, and her friend, Margaret Eype, lived near the coast, she accepted the invitation with an enthusiasm that surprised her cousins; for Nina was as miserable in a strange house as a cat with buttered paws. When, however, she considered that she might never have another opportunity of seeing the Cobb and identifying the flight of steps down which *Louisa Musgrove* was jumped by *Captain Wentworth*, she decided to face the discomforts of strange knives and forks, of making conversation, deciding for herself how dressy her first dinner dress ought to be, saying no to second helpings, making a move when she thought her hostess didn't want her, and tipping the servants when she left. "Do you tip the butler, Aunt, if you're not married? I wish I could be sure." But she liked Margaret Eype: she wanted to go to Lyme: she thought she could probably bear it.

She went, and her life was changed for her.

She found the Eypes as strange as foreigners, but she liked them. They did not expect her to make arch conver-

sation: they did not expect her to do anything in particular in the way of entertaining them. Instead, they talked among themselves, neither excluding nor including her, of their own or their neighbours' affairs, without troubling to explain either. And she found their conversation as mysterious as the new detective stories by Mr. Conan Doyle in the *Strand Magazine*, and as absorbing as the novels by Mr. Thomas Hardy that her aunt would not let her read. The Eypes actually knew Mr. Hardy, they told her; for he lived not thirty miles away. She could hardly believe that she should ever know people who knew a famous writer. But there she was, within thirty miles of Thomas Hardy, within ten miles of Jane Austen's Lyme, listening to quiet voices that discussed books as if they were people and people as if they were books, and spoke of history as if they lived in it. When Margaret's father said 'we' you never knew if he meant himself or his own great-grandfather. Indeed the Eypes were stranger than any foreigners she had encountered, for at the end of three days she did not know anything at all about their more private affairs. She knew them exactly as well as she had known them in the first half-hour, and felt that in three weeks or three years she would know them no better.

But she was loth to go when her week-end was over: she had not believed that she could enjoy herself so well: and when Margaret asked her to stay longer and Lady Eype added her casual—"Stay on a little, Miss Drury, if you care to: Margaret will be glad to have you. Besides, there's the garden-party at Babyon to-morrow: you ought to see Babyon,"—she thanked them very much and went up joyously to unpack her half-packed trunk with the round top for hats, take the tissue paper out of her dresses, and wonder which of them would be proper for the garden-party at Babyon. She did not know whether Babyon was a castle or a cottage; but her visit had taught her that in the country you were never in danger

of being too shabby, but in deadly danger always of looking, as her dear Miss Austen would say—'too fine!'

She wore, in the end, her new champagne-coloured voile, though its sleeves and full skirts stiffened with wire at the hem were new fashions, and Margaret had cried out when she saw her—"What, are they bringing in crinolines again! They'll never do it!" and Lady Eype, who read books, began to talk bewilderingly of sleeves, and of queer Emily Brontë, not of familiar Charlotte. Emily, it seemed, wore leg-o'-mutton sleeves long after the fashion had gone out. And then Lady Eype asked Antonina what she thought of *Wuthering Heights*. Antonina sat up half the night finding out what she thought of *Wuthering Heights*, and was disappointed when Lady Eype would not talk about it at breakfast—

"Oh, did it interest you? Margaret, you'll have to plant out the antirrhinums yourself this morning. Gapper has his hands full. We shan't have any plants left if they stay in the frame much longer," said Lady Eype.

"Can't I help?" said Antonina, regretfully abandoning *Wuthering Heights:* and learnt for the rest of the morning the difference between ordering lobelias from the nurseryman and preparing borders under the eye of an expert. She had her reward.

"I like that girl," said Lady Eype to her daughter, as Antonina, with earth-caked hands and her elaborate morning dress green at the knees, fled upstairs to prepare for lunch. And Margaret said to Antonina with a certain air of triumph as they hooked each other's dresses in the afternoon—

"I say, Mother likes you: she said so."

"I'm glad," said Antonina sedately.

"She doesn't like my friends as a rule. She doesn't like any one much. She's as touchy as a Babyon."

"Oh, is Babyon people? I thought it was a place."

"The Babyons have always lived at Babyon Court.

We're going there to-day: it's not ten miles. Oh, Nicholas is nice, of course, when one is a visitor; but the Babyons are difficult to get on with. Old Sir Charles quarrelled with every one before he died, except us. We're cousins, you know: at least, Father and Nicholas are step-cousins. He's the last of the Babyons, except for his sisters; but they're all married. I wonder how you'll like Nicholas: I can never get at him somehow; but all the Babyons are always miles away from you. I'm glad I'm not one," said Margaret dispassionately: and told Antonina to hurry, for it was three o'clock and her mother hated to be kept waiting.

So the pink sprigged muslin and the champagne voile ran downstairs in a hurry, and off they went through the hot weather, behind the greys and the fat coachman, in the old-fashioned victoria with the dusty blue cushions. They went up and down green-roofed lanes and over cross-roads sentinelled by oaks, into valleys watered by tinkling brooks and carpeted with iris, up on to an open common, with seascapes hung like banners behind the broad-based hills that flanked it, and clouds like hills rising behind the seas. They drove across it with the wind singing loud and the larks singing high, and the horses' hoofs beating—

> 'You should see me dance the polka!
> You should see me cover the ground——'

in Antonina's ears, till they turned at last into a road with high walls, and under a pompous gateway, and so through glittering rhododendron thickets on to the sweep of gravel before the pillared doorway of Babyon Court.

The front of the house had been faced with white stone. It threw a coffin-shaped shadow on to the pebbled drive and the lawn beyond: and within its shadow the air was still and cold, eclipsed. But beyond its grey outline the grass glowed in the rich sunshine as if an elixir had been spilled upon it, and under the golden oaks and the double cherries the earth had long since burst out into the daffodils of March whose spent clumps were now hidden in butter-

cups and meadow daisy. Antonina, staring about her, had an odd fancy that the wide-flung, blazing garden was a revolted soldiery, trumpeting defiance in the face of the commanding house, and thought—'But the house is the master: there's not a creeper on the walls!' She was absorbed by the aspect of the ungarlanded formal house, and had no eyes for the ladies and gentlemen strolling from the lawns, not even for a decorous St. Bernard padding from group to group at the heels of his master. Margaret had to twitch her sleeve—

"Nina, wake up! This is Nicholas. Sir Nicholas Babyon—Miss Drury!"

She turned, shook hands silently with a middle-aged man as formal as the house, and stooped to pat the panting dog. But Margaret wanted her to see the roses and the view from the terrace, and presently took her away. Their host watched the two girls till they disappeared behind the yew hedge: then he turned to his cousin—

"Who is she?"

"A school friend of Margaret's. We like her. A nice quiet girl."

"Pretty," said he.

"Yes."

"She reminds me of some one."

"It's the suggestion of crinoline. She's like all our grandmothers in that dress. Full frocks suit the young things."

"It's a pretty fashion," he said.

"All the same, I do hope crinolines don't come in again."

"I remember Mother in a crinoline."

"I remember myself in a bustle. That was bad enough to garden in. That reminds me, Nicholas, I want some more of your young tomato plants. Gapper left the panes uncovered in the frost last week and ruined mine. Unless I go round every evening myself and hold that man's hand—— Can you spare me some?"

"Of course. As many as you like," said Nicholas. "What did you say her name was?"

"Who?"

"Margaret's friend."

"Oh, Drury! Antonina Drury."

"Who are her people?"

"I really don't know. Anglo-Indian, I fancy. She lives with some relatives at Wimbledon. Where did you get that cistus, Nicholas? My dear Nicholas, I must have a cutting of that cistus."

"Are you staying to dinner, Muriel?"

"Well, I hadn't planned to. Do you want us?"

"Every one will have cleared off by six. You had better stay. And then Thomson will have time to see to your plants."

"Oh, there's Mrs. Patterson. I must speak to Mrs. Patterson. Mrs. Patterson, do you know this cistus? No, nor do I. Don't you want a cutting? I'm going to take several. No, of course he doesn't mind. I've a lucky hand with cuttings. Very well, Nicholas, we'll stay if you mean it. Yes, I'ld like to. Will you tell the girls?"

So the Eypes stayed to dinner: and while they waited for that meal Lady Eype went out to see about her plants and Margaret took her friend over the house.

"I must show her the picture gallery, Nicholas. Nina knows a lot about pictures. No, don't bother to come. There are quantities of people on the lawn still."

But when they had been over the state apartments and stood at last in the long gallery that ran the length of the house and had been divided by the main staircase into a picture room and an open corridor, and were watching the red sunset through the immense glass windows facing west, Lady Eype in the garden below caught sight of them, and, laden, signalled vehemently to Margaret to come down and help her. Tomato plants were the least of her spoils.

"Here, I must fly. Mother will loot the whole place."

"Shall I come?"

"Why should you? You stay and look at your pictures. I'll be back in a minute."

Margaret fled: and Nina, left to herself, deserted the window for the walls. The collection was a fine one: a Guido, a Lippi, a doubtful Bronzino, and two or three Sienese saints made her cry "Italy!" to the jumble, and feel familiarly at home. She said to herself—"Oh, if I had money, how I would buy pictures—buy and buy and buy!" and then flushed up finely in the empty gallery because she had fallen into her forbidden trick of talking to herself. "I saw you only yesterday from the top of an omnibus, without gloves on, talking away to yourself!" Her aunt's voice rang in her memory—"What do you think men will think of you, talking away to yourself in the open street? You will be followed."

Here she was again, talking away to herself! She sighed at her own perversity and turned from the Italians to the family portraits. A labelled black-and-white Jane Babyon in a gossamer ruff, holding a pink between her finger and thumb, faced a black-and-white John Babyon with a parchment in his ringed hand. Jacoby was like Charles the Martyr in dress and look, but fairer. Sharlot Babyon came next, a heavy-lidded, simpering Diana in a satin nightdress, with a crescent moon in her ringleted hair. She wore a coral necklace, carried a bow and arrow and looked down upon an Endymion asleep in a periwig and amber satin coat. Endymion appeared again as an elderly judge, and his three sons, Arthur, Jason, and William, shared the next canvas. A dark woman in a mulberry gown was labelled Hariot, daughter of Sir Jason Babyon, and beside her again hung the unfinished sketch of a fair-haired boy standing beside a fair-haired girl in blue. She turned from this James and Menella Babyon to a picture of later date of another fair-haired girl in a full flowing gown, who carried a child in her arms and had another at her knee. The face was painted with the enamel finish of English art in the forties, and the method lent no life to the delicate, expressionless features: yet the portrait had beauty at that moment, for the slanting sunshine of evening flung a

searchlight upon the smooth face, lit up the gold bands of hair, the fantastic turban head-dress and the folds of the gown that the varnish had yellowed from white to honey colour: and the high polish flung off the light again like a mirror. Antonina turned where she stood, quite dazzled, and, to rest her eyes, tried to see the picture on the shadowy wall opposite. It was too big for close quarters—a vast classical spread to which even her inexperience cried "Rubbish!" It was as thickly coated with varnish as the picture beside her, and its dark background had blackened beneath it into mere spoiled canvas. But the central figures stood out still, and Antonina found them interesting—a Medea with her children crouched at Creusa's feet. Then her interest increased as she made a discovery; for though the face of the bride expressed anger, wariness, aversion in every feature, it was the face of the still girl with the babies on the opposite wall.

"It's the same woman!" cried Antonina as she stood looking eagerly from one picture to the other. "She isn't stupid: it's a mask—mask on, mask off—that's it! I wonder who she was." She stooped to look for the name as her host came in at the end of the long gallery.

He had a quiet tread and she did not see or hear him as she raised her head once more to stare with intenser interest at the nameless portrait. Antonina was brown-eyed and brown-haired, a richer woman than the young creature of the picture; yet, in her honey-coloured dress, the round toque on her head hiding her hair and throwing her face into shadow, she might have been the Victorian lady stepping out of her frame. It was a trick of light and drapery, and her first startled movement dispelled the illusion, yet for a moment Nicholas had been held by it, a breathless watcher. Then he went forward to her and startled her in turn, for she had expected Margaret. She did not quite know how to bear herself. Ought she to have stayed there? Ought she to have gone downstairs? Had they been looking for her? She addressed him doubtfully—

"Margaret did say—'wait here.'"

"Yes, of course!" said he.

Reassured, she rushed into the too eager speech of the shy woman—

"I couldn't stop looking at the pictures. This one—who is she? She makes your heart ache. She must have been unhappy. Mask on—mask off—that's the look. It haunts me: doesn't it you? Who was she?"

He said—

"That is my mother."

She wished she had held her tongue and said so:

"I thought she was in history or I shouldn't have said what I did. I must have hurt your feelings. I'm very sorry."

If her directness got her into trouble, it usually got her out again. He liked her apology and her kind eyes, and said so in his fashion—

"You couldn't know. You were right. She wasn't happy." And then—"Are you fond of pictures? Here's the best of them." He pointed to the wide landscape that the window framed, and drawing nearer she saw that the great sheet of plate glass was indeed held in position, not by the usual sashes, but by just such a heavy carved gold frame as that which held the Guido. The device amused her.

"I like that. Who thought of that?"

"That was my mother's idea. She was very fond of gardening: indeed, she made the gardens. When she was too ill to go out she used to be wheeled here in her chair so that she could look at them. It does make a picture, doesn't it, with no sash to interfere? I'm afraid we haven't much better to show. The rest is nearly all family. But here now——" he paused by the Bronzino.

"Is it a copy?" said Antonina.

He was amused.

"We're beginning to think so!"

"Oh, I only meant——"

"Just so. My grandfather sent it home from Italy. He

was always buying pictures, but my mother found that most of them were worthless. She wouldn't have rubbish in the house. But this has been respected till lately. But now every one says to us—'Is it a copy?' Do you like this better?"

"I like this," said Antonina, not following him. She had paused before a full-length portrait of a lady in green-and-white draperies.

"Isabella? She's our family scandal."

"Oh, what did she do?"

He laughed.

"I'm afraid she ran away with a gipsy."

"It's a Reynolds, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"She has a strange face. I think it's beautiful. I wonder——" She wanted to hear the romantic story, and her face said it so plainly that he laughed. He found it a pleasure to please her: it was impossible to resist her interest. For she was genuinely excited. Her simple life had had its one brilliant pause—the two years in Italy. She was resigned to be dully happy in England, but when unexpectedly she was confronted with a private picture gallery and old histories, she slipped out of her conventional bearing and became recklessly the Antonina that only Antonina knew. Nicholas thought that she was singularly unlike any young woman of his acquaintance, at once more childish and more mature. He found her interest warming him, for in secret he worshipped his household gods. He began—"It's too long a story to tell you—" and began to tell it and told it well. He showed her the Sir Ludovic who was Isabella's twin, and took her to the little window again to point out the farm where Isabella's lover had lived ("My mother was born there—") and the woods above it where the duel had taken place.

"And nobody knew what happened?"

"Nobody. They were found dead."

"And nobody saw Isabella again?"

"Nobody——" He checked himself. She fancied that his countenance changed. "She was seen again once, later," said he. "My mother saw her once."

"Did she know it was Isabella?"

"Not at the time."

She looked her intense interest: and he could not help, for all his reticence, gratifying it:

"You see—Isabella's daughter—her child was my mother. She and my father were second cousins."

Both perceived that much history was hidden behind that flat statement. But Antonina flashed clear over all the questions which, he now saw with irritation, he had made it possible for her to ask, with her schoolgirl's "Oh!"

"Oh! Oh, then—then you have gipsy in you?"

He nodded, laughing.

"Oh, but that is exciting! You see, at Wimbledon——" She looked at him with her clear comprehending gaze, too young to be impertinent: "Do you have wild fits? Do you feel sometimes that you can't bear houses, bear rooms, bear people?"

"That's it!" said he.

"So do I," said Nina. "And what do you do then?"

"Walk," said Nicholas.

"Oh, but one has always to be back for meals."

"I don't," said Nicholas. And then—"I'm afraid I don't. Once I—" he laughed at himself—"once I went out for an hour and I didn't come back for two months."

"Where did you go?"

"Cornwall—Scillies—across to Brittany—in a fishing boat down the Garonne to the Pyrenees."

"Oh, what a walk! And nobody knew where you were?"

"No," said Nicholas.

"And nobody minded?"

"No," said Nicholas.

"Oh," cried she, "oh, how I do envy you!"

"Don't," said Nicholas, still half smiling at that, and

held her puzzled glance arrested, as if his eyes, without his knowledge, were saying more than his mouth.

How long is a look? What can happen in a look? In that look she learned him by heart, features, colouring, the modelling of his flesh, the very texture of his skin. She was to see him daily for years and yet be able to call up at will, to see beside the ageing face, his true face as she had seen it on the day of their first meeting, the face without its mask, the face of his unageing soul. Her own soul was shaken by the meeting: her virginity cried within her—'This is the man!' What he saw in the darkness of her eyes he never told her; but he made a quick movement towards her and she, bewildered, not knowing what she did, put out her hand. He did not take it, but he continued to look at her intently. How long is a look? "Don't!" he was still saying, as Margaret's voice on the other side of the curtain broke in upon them—

"Nina! Nicholas! Where have you got to?" She entered in a hurry: "Oh, there you are! So sorry, Nina! You know what Mother is. Have you been here all the time?"

"I've been showing her the Babyons," said Nicholas as they left the gallery and went down the shallow stairs together. He stopped a moment on the half landing to show Miss Drury "Isabella's room." It was a small square room with a walnut chest in it, crimson hangings at the tall window, on the small four-poster, a needlework Adam and Eve on a fire-screen, a pistol box, and a standish and sand-box on the walnut writing-table.

"As she left it?" said Nina.

"More or less. My father used it sometimes as an office. But there are all the south rooms since her day. Nobody cares for this side of the house: it's so sunless."

She thought—'So a woman lived here, used this table, who saw a duel and her brother killed, her lover killed—for her! How did she feel? And ran away to the gipsies. That was living! And he—he's got it all in him, buried

somewhere. I've nothing like that in me, only butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers! What it must be to carry a past like that about with you! Oh, I envy him!' —and, looking across at him to see again how a man looked with such a past in his veins, found him once more looking at her as if he knew her thoughts.

A gong banged.

"Dinner!" said Margaret joyfully. "Come along, you two! I'm hungry!"

II

The dark drive home left her chilled and tired. She sat on the edge of her bed, brushing her hair for the enjoined twenty minutes, listening to Margaret, politely answering Margaret's questions.

Had she enjoyed herself? Wasn't Babyon a fascinating place? Wasn't Nicholas nice? Did Nina find him difficult to talk to? Most girls did. But he meant to be nice, you know. He had tried awfully hard at dinner to be nice, though he was not, Margaret thought, a comfortable host. He was best out of doors. Oh, she had forgotten to show Nina the stables. Did Nina ride? She must come down in the winter then. Was Nina sleepy? Margaret could hardly keep her eyes open.

"Good-night, Nina!"

Antonina said—"Good-night!"

The door closed.

Two hours later she was still sitting in bewilderment, as Margaret had left her, on the edge of her bed, watching her own face in the mirror. She could not sleep. She thought she would never sleep again. Her world was in upheaval. She said to herself over and over again—"Am I mad? What has happened to me? I must be going mad." As she leaned forward she saw his face, quite clearly, rising in the glass out of a silver mist. She shook her head and the face was gone.

She flung back her hair in a feverish torment of restlessness, rose, turned to the window and leaned out. The stars glittered in a dark blue sky. As she watched, the clouds on the horizon gathered to a silver mist and his face rose out of it and looked at her. She shook her head and it was gone.

She began to say aloud—"I must see him again. I must see him again," till her own voice struck unnaturally on her ear and she turned back into the room crying, "I must be mad. What has he to do with me? I've never seen him before, and I shall never see him again. I must go to sleep. I must try and go to sleep——" and then, again—"I must see him. Why shouldn't I? I only want to see him. I must see him again."

She flung herself down on her bed and lay staring at the dim wall: and the pattern of the paper gathered itself into a silver mist and his face rose out of it and looked at her. His lips moved. Then she knew the cause of her fever: she was hearing a call for help. She shut her ears against the call, her hands pressed over them: and turning where she lay, thrust her face into the pillows. But within her eyelids a mist gathered, and his face rose out of it and looked at her, and would not be gone.

III

Nicholas Babyon, who did not talk about his wants or his plans to any one, intended to marry and wanted a son. Yet the years went by and he was still uncompanioned at Babyon. Occasionally an inquisitive woman would ask him point-blank—"Aren't you going to get married, Sir Nicholas?" or declare—"The truth is, Sir Nicholas, you need a wife!" and was answered by a stare and a change of subject. But when Muriel Eype said, as she had said to him at irregular intervals for ten years—"Nick, you ought to marry!"—Nicholas always took it in good part

with—"So I shall one day!" As he was too good a tennis player to enjoy partnering women in long skirts and feathered hats, he ran the risk of being called a woman-hater; but as he was also a careful host, it was decided that he was not a woman-hater but a man with a secret. He had a mistress in St. John's Wood——! He had a wife in an asylum——! He had had an affair with a Chinese lady——! He was deeply attached to a married woman——! He had been in love with a Roman Catholic who could not marry him because of the difference in religion——! Therefore he excusably refused invitations to tennis parties and gave no rector's daughter an opportunity to consider herself badly treated.

Nicholas Babyon, unaware of these previous engagements, continued to be sure that he would marry one day, though he made no effort to bring his marriage about. Instead, he worked intermittently at his profession of landowner: coddled his village and sent cattle to the Agricultural Shows. Every few years, however, a restless spirit possessed him and he would casually leave Babyon to look after itself, with some help from Muriel Eype, while he joined company with wild-cat acquaintances who went digging in Greece, or trading carpets in the Caucasus, fomenting revolution in Central America or hunting alpines in the Chinese highlands. Nicholas had great pleasure in watching such activities: and if he had no convenient ally he would go tramping by himself, here, there, anywhere, and come home thinner, quieter, poorer than when he went away; but always with a treasure or two arriving ahead of him—a bronze, a carpet, books—always just in time to check the decay of his property, but never in time for it to recover fully its former prosperity, and Lady Eype would regularly round off the account of her stewardship with—

"Why on earth don't you marry, Nicholas, and settle down?"

"I shall one day."

He would not marry till he found what he wanted. He

wanted—he never told any one what he wanted; but when he met Antonina Drury he began to think that he had found it. She remembered him of the unfulfilled wishes of his youth, though how she did so he could not say. He could not rid himself of the picture she had stamped upon his mind: she was fixed there, not in flesh and blood, but as an outline, a Victorian silhouette backed by a landscape framed in gold. He found himself thinking of her as he went about his work on the day after his cousin's visit. The restless spirit was stirring in him as never before, and he wondered if it were time for a departure. But he had only been home a month and Babyon was crying out for attention. He could not possibly get away. He thought that Margaret's friend must be very unlike the modern girl: she had hardly spoken at dinner. But it seemed to him that they had said a good deal to each other in the gallery, though only her comment on his mother's portrait remained with him. How had she known what he alone knew? Women, he supposed, understood women instinctively: at any rate, women of a type understood each other. He thought that she must be of his mother's type, though he believed that such women as his mother had ceased to exist in his dull day. He could not get Margaret's friend out of his head. Yet he could not clearly remember her face: he did not know the colour of her eyes: he doubted if he would know her if they met on a highway: she was an outline, not a girl. He thought that he would like to see her again as a girl, not as an outline. He wondered if she had brains: she struck him as intelligent. He thought he would like to see her soon.

Two days later he walked over to Eype: four days later he dined at Eype and stayed the night, and the night after. The next day Antonina's visit came to an end. She went home. There was letter-writing. The last letter was from Lady Eype. Antonina stayed again at Eype. She arrived on a Thursday, and on Monday the news was all over the county.

"He's engaged at last! Sir Nicholas is engaged to a Miss Drury."

"A London girl, I hear, half his age."

"Would you believe it, Nicholas is engaged at last!"

"About time, too!"

"I don't envy the young lady: he's set in his ways."

"I don't know. He's a good match."

"She's simple, they say. Pretty. Too young, of course."

"At his age they always marry schoolgirls. But personally I never thought he'ld marry."

"The title dies out if he doesn't."

"Oh, I see! All the same—

'Wife at Babyon
Strife at Babyon.'

You know what the country folk say! I wouldn't risk marrying a Babyon."

"No, I wouldn't marry a Babyon."

Three months later they were married.

IV

Antonina was happier in the first weeks of her marriage than she had ever been in her life. During her engagement she had known that she was happy rather than realised it; for her nature had been all but overwhelmed by a tidal wave of emotion for which nothing in her short past had prepared her. She was swept along helplessly, crying in terror rather than in ecstasy, "Is this then love?" But married she grew calmer. It was as if the wave had passed over her to Nicholas, and that he rocked in its flood while she was already in deeper, quieter waters. For he felt sometimes as if his lifelong restlessness had been no more than a search for the state in which he found himself, stirred, stimulated, satisfied, companioned, and the wonder of it was a second youth to him. If he found himself

saying oftener to himself, "I love," than to his wife, "I love you," neither he nor she spoiled their honeymoon by hair-splitting. It was enough for them that, with all Sicily to explore, their time was delightfully engrossed, and that their tastes and wishes appeared identical: that he should find her intense enjoyment of the commonplaces of travel enhancing his own more sophisticated enjoyment, and that she should find it an endless excitement and amusement to fall in with all his arrangements, to behave like her own ideal of a sedate married woman taking her husband for granted, while in the trains, on the platforms, on board ship, in hotel parlours, in ruined temples, or in dark little shops, buying lace for her cousins, her heart sang to her—"I am his! He is mine!"

Indeed, though they were not inclined to discuss their relationship, they did once agree, as they sat on the flowery balcony of their bedroom, watching Etna in the sunset deepen for a marvellous instant to the colour of the bougainvilleas, that they were almost entirely happy, and that they only needed to be settled at Babyon for the rest of their lives to be completely so. He said that, Sicily or no Sicily, there was no place like Babyon: she wondered if bougainvilleas would grow there: she would like to take plants home and see if she could coax them to live: she looked forward to the gardening—

"When I have learned a lot, will you let me look after the gardens, Nicholas, as your mother did? You said your mother did. Lady Eype has promised to teach me everything. Oh, and I want to make a rockery somewhere: there isn't one, is there? May I?"

"You can do what you like, of course," said Nicholas.

She gave him a quick look. She had the ridiculous fancy that he was not pleased. She said at last, uncertainly—

"Nicholas——"

"Yes?"

"Don't you want me to do things in the garden?"

"Why shouldn't I?" said Nicholas.

"I don't know. It was the way you said——"

"I said I wanted you to do exactly what you liked," said Nicholas: and he rose, moving away from her to the other end of the balcony, and, leaning his arms on the railings and crushing the bougainvilleas, he stared across the darkening valley at Etna with her puff of smoke and her star, faint as dreams in the brilliant heavens.

She was suddenly frightened. She watched him with a lump in her throat. What had she done? She tried to laugh at herself. Of course she had done nothing. She called to him down the balcony—

"Nicholas!"

"Yes," he said, without moving.

She rose and came to him, talking as she moved—

"I know I shall make mistakes. But I do want to be a proper Lady Babyon, to do what they've all done. Nicholas, it's so exciting to be Lady Babyon. Nicholas—" she slipped her arm through his—"Nicholas, talk to me! What are you looking at?"

He nodded towards the burning mountain, and for a long while they watched it darken while the star above it grew bright. But he did not talk to her.

The faint sense of oppression was gone next day and she began to look forward to a Sicilian Christmas. But as it drew near there was revealed to her a new Nicholas, a Nicholas daily growing more restless and showing his restlessness by neither liking to be with her nor letting her be alone, until, in childish wonder at an unevenness of temper incomprehensible to her simpler nature, she broke out at him one morning with—

"What is the matter, Nicholas? Are you feeling all right?"

"Perfectly," said he.

"What is it then?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"But, Nicholas, you must know what I mean. What makes you as if you didn't like any one all of a sudden?

Look—look how you're looking at me—" for he had shot at her a glance so wary, so hostile, that for a moment she thought, 'He's changing under my eyes. In another moment he won't be Nicholas. I shall be alone in a foreign country without Nicholas.' Then, to her immense relief, the stranger went out of his face and he was saying with his familiar kindness—

"I'm sorry, Nina! It's that infernal tune."

"The carol?" she said, puzzled; for it had pleased her, as all strangeness pleased her.

"D'you call it a carol?" said he with extraordinary bitterness.

"What do you call it?" said she.

He said—

"Well, listen!"

She listened.

The tune had been for a week in the background of her consciousness, a part of the festival that was preparing, a thin, wheedling tune, a ghostly tune—

'Ha! hee-hee-hee!
Hee! ah-ha-ha!',

She had been aware of it swelling round street corners, drifting across the Roman theatre, dwindling into silence as they left the town for the hill paths: and once she had given money to a beggar with bagpipes. If she had been asked she would have called it casually a quaint little tune; but when Nicholas put it to her, she owned that it could not be called a carol:

'When shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground ——'

hummed Antonina, making comparisons. As she did so the tune itself broke out into a screech under their very window—

'Ha! hee-hee-hee!
Hee! ah-ha-ha!'

and she perceived that it was indeed un-Christian, unbearable. It was the wail of Persephone in her hell beneath their feet: it was the giggle of her tormentors.

She opened her purse and threw down hush-money into the flowery mouth of hell, and for a moment the tune ceased.

"Hateful!" said Antonina in the silence, and shivered.

"Ah, you hear it too?" Relief was in his face.

"It's like a ghost calling."

"Yes," he said. And then—"I can't tell you what it does to me."

He could not tell her, but, watching him, she saw what it did to him. She did not comprehend why the tune should so bedevil him, but she saw enough of its effect to make her, for the first time in her married life, take the initiative.

"Nicholas, why need we stay? It was only another fortnight anyhow. Let's go home to Babyon! Start now—to-night."

"But you wanted——" he began.

"No, I don't. I shall hear that tune now, just as you do. It'll drive me frantic too. Let's go, Nicholas! Let's have a comic Christmas in the train. You get the tickets whilst I pack. Shall we?"

"I don't mind," said Nicholas.

"No, but shall we?"

He said nothing.

"Well, we will then," decided Antonina, and stooped to pull her travelling-case from under the bed. She got it open and kneeling beside it began shuffling resolutely with the tissue packing papers. Presently she had it emptied, and lifting her hand to pull herself upright by the bed-rail, found him still looking at her, as he had looked at her on their first meeting, intently, with unguarded eyes: and her heart ached as she saw the trouble in them that she could not understand. All she could do was to smile at him. Suddenly he came over to her, stooped and kissed

her, and she clung to him, kissing him again. Then, as a gust of the tune tittered and wailed once more into the room, he straightened himself and went away quickly: and she set to work to pack.

They left for England that night and, once in the train, he quickly recovered his spirits and became once more the Nicholas with whom she had fallen in love. But the incident had taught her this—that she loved him now, no longer timidly, experimentally, but with her whole tenacious soul. If she began to see why Margaret and everybody else found him difficult to get on with, none the less she despised them and exulted over them. How could they understand him? Only his wife could understand him and give him what he wanted.

She had set her heart on giving him everything he wanted. But so untutored was she that not until she paid, four months later, a duty visit to the noisy, friendly dolls' house that had once been her world, did she learn that she was to give him what he wanted. Her aunt looked her up and down and told her all about herself and was kind, and sent her back to Babyon a shaken, rejoicing creature, and wrote her long letters of good advice thereafter once a week, addressed with delightful ostentation and majestic ringings for the maid, to Lady Babyon, Babyon Court, Babyon, Devon—

"Post this at once, Mary! It's for Miss Nina—for Lady Babyon."

"Is the news fair and so-so, Ma'am, with her ladyship?"

"Pretty good, Mary! As well as can be expected. I shall be going down later, I dare say. I shall be sent for."

But Antonina did not send for her. Antonina had learnt many things in her months at Babyon, and the first thing she had learnt painfully was that, though B may like A and worship C—, A, B, and C do not necessarily make a house-party. She was so proud of Babyon. She spent a month or two learning her house and how to be mistress

of it: then she had to show it to her relations: surely you ought to show your house and your husband to your relations? Gladys was in Hong-Kong; but Eva and Ethel had come to stay at Babyon, and she had welcomed them with so proud and gay a heart. But after a week she had been ruefully glad to see them go. They were the same dear kind Eva and Ethel, with high incessant voices and dresses like rainbows: and they babbled praises of Babyon and Nicholas; but they could not keep warm. They wore outdoor jackets in the house and wondered if they might have the windows shut: and got up to shut the doors themselves when Nina, as usual, left them open: and said that they had always understood that old houses were draughty and that it didn't matter a bit. Antonina took them out for the nice brisk walk which she herself daily undertook with less distaste; but they had not the right shoes for cross-country tramping, would as soon ford the Styx as the shallow pebbly swift-pelting Babyon. There remained the long walk down the avenue. But the avenue, said Ethel, gave her the horrors, though she would not say so to any one but Antonina. She had never seen anything so strange as those jet-black rhododendrons.

She had reason. The treble rows of trees on either side of the walk had long since been choked by the wildly growing rhododendron bushes that had been first planted in Sir Henry's day. The immense bushes, taller than the Lodge cottage, had raced the trees skywards, and though the trees had won, they were incredibly tall and thin, stilt trees, crowned aimless poles that lived and greened only at their crowns, mere boundary posts for a black and flowerless sea of foliage that dazingly reflected the sunlight as if every leaf were polished steel. Ethel said that either Nina should have the miles of rhododendrons thinned out or that she should get Nicholas to cut down the choked trees. "The trees are ruined, the rhododendrons don't bloom. One or other ought to go."

But the flashing steel wood, before summer greened and

dulled it, fascinated Nina: the straight path and the black walls reminded her of her favourite room indoors, the long corridor-like gallery, its walls lined with blackened, glittering pictures of all the Babyons, and she could understand how Nicholas felt when Ethel told him that he ought to cut down his trees: and was grateful to him for not saying what he felt. For she was beginning to understand that not only did her cousins find Babyon dull and Nicholas duller, but that Nicholas, courteous, silent, seldom to be found when you wanted him, did not like Eva and Ethel. Antonina, when she discovered this, redoubled her attentions to her relatives the more because, at the bottom of her heart, she began to discover that she did not like them so very much either. She was ashamed of herself. She called herself an ingrate, a snob, a cold-heart, a forgetter of old times. But all her self-reproaches could not alter the fact that she had no longer admired Ethel's manners and dresses and that she found Eva's flow of conversation tiring: and once she had so envied Eva's flow! 'It's queer how marriage alters you,' thought Antonina, as she blew kisses to her cousins, perched in the dog-cart, and waved to them from the black shadow of the house as they dwindled into dots of pink and blue in a toy cart down the long, arrow-straight drive.

"Yes, marriage alters you," sighed Antonina, and was glad that marriage altered you, as she returned to the luxury of silence, empty rooms and Nicholas. Now they were gone, Nicholas would talk to her again. He had been very kind all the week, had been helpful about taking out the horses and cutting flowers and opening wine and remembering what Eva and Ethel took. But he had not opened his lips to her for all his careful courtesy. Indeed, she was learning that he had a capacity, when he found himself in circumstances not to his liking, for retreating into an interior Nicholas, leaving only a middle-aged shell to fill his shoes. She watched such retreats with droll

wonder, and sometimes, so young was she, purposely provoked them, like a child gently touching a snail's horns to see how quickly the head will get itself hidden. For she could not believe that his retreats were anything more than a form of jesting, and she was quite ready to enter into the jest with him. It did not occur to her that he could be seriously irritated. Of course Eva talked like a mill-race: of course Ethel minced and was affected with him, because she was afraid of his title. But what did it matter? Live and let live! They were only visitors: they would go away soon: and then she and Nicholas would be together again in a honeymoon quiet.

Easier said than done. The violet-powder scent was aired out of the spare bedrooms, the parlour ceased to be a feminine litter of tapes and ends of lace and paper patterns, turquoise and diamond rings were no longer regularly left in the soap-dish in the lobby, and the grave house righted itself. But Nicholas, she found to her dismay, did not right himself. She had rioted childishly with her cousins, assuming the more eagerly the manner of a former intimacy because the matter of the intimacy had so singularly vanished: and she had been aware that he had watched the display. It had made her uncomfortable to feel him watching her, but she had said to herself—'Wait till we are alone again.' But alone he still watched her, was still wary and aloof. It was as if he were not sure that the masquerade was over, as if he was saying to himself disappointedly, 'I see that this is my wife!'

His trouble and hers put itself at last into speech.

Said she—

"Nicholas, I'm glad we're alone again. Aren't you?"

He turned the page of his book. She continued—

"Though they are nice, aren't they? I've always been so fond of them: they've always been very kind to me. They have their own ways of course." She watched him as he went on reading. She could not be content to let him

go on reading. She wanted his attention. She wanted communication. She wanted contact of some sort. She worried at him—

"What did you think of them? I wondered if you liked them. I was half afraid you didn't. You didn't like them, did you?" and so got him to say all that she could expect of him in a—

"No, I'm afraid I didn't, particularly."

Inevitably she said, hurt—

"I'm sorry." And then quickly—"Of course, I knew you wouldn't." There was a pause. She said again, dolefully—"Of course I knew all the time that you didn't," for she was bitterly disappointed. She felt it intolerable that he should not like anything that was or had been hers, as if a distaste for anything that pleased her were a limitation of their intimacy. She could not leave bad alone—

"Nicholas, why didn't you like them?"

He said—

"My dear Nina, what does it matter? You will probably dislike my relations. Why discuss it?"

"Oh," she cried, "I wouldn't. Of course I'ld like your people. Of course I like everything that's yours!" And then, at a tangent—"I'm dreadfully sorry, Nicholas! Why didn't you tell me? I'ld have got rid of them."

He went on reading.

"Nicholas, are you annoyed with me? I can't help my relations."

Then at last he gave her the hostile look she dreaded; but she blundered on—

"Are you annoyed? What is it? Nicholas, don't be so stiff. Be human with me! Nicholas——"

His patience failed him—

"For the Lord's sake, Nina, don't catechise me! Let me go my own way! I've nothing against your people."

"But, Nicholas, if you'd said when we were engaged that you didn't like them——"

He slammed down his book on the table.

"Are you going to cross-question me each time we have a visitor? Listen to me, Nina! I want you to enjoy yourself: you can do what you like and have whom you like; but you're to leave me alone! Surely it's easy enough to leave me alone."

He stopped: he picked up his book again and went on with his reading, while she sat silent on the other side of the fire staring at her hands, trying to control herself. Her dismay at the turn of affairs was so immense as to paralyse her sense of injury. She badly wanted to cry, and she was too much frightened to indulge in that relief, and far too proud to let him see, if she could help it, her dismay and her agitation. But above all she was bewildered: she could not conceive how, suddenly, on her beautiful blue sky, so black a cloud could have shaped itself.

V

They made it up that evening, for, irritating as Nicholas found it to be married to his Antonina, he could not quarrel with her. He had only himself to blame, he said to himself, if he had thought her a woman when she was no more than a dear, maddening, overgrown child who tried his temper and his nerves, yet disarmed him by instant alarmed submission to any ugly whim of his temper or his lacerated nerves. How could he quarrel with a child, and a loving child too, with so firm a belief in his rectitude that it would distress itself into tears of apology for injuries inflicted upon it. It is a child's right to be gay and noisy, and its elders, though they check it, must check it kindly: and he was aware that he had not always checked his Antonina kindly for being a gay and noisy child. Instead he had worked off upon her his own dismay at the gulf of years and temperament that he now saw

so clearly yawning between them. He was meanly punishing her, he told himself, for being twenty years younger than he: he was revenging upon her the fact that it was in her nature to run forward crying "Yes, yes!" while he shrank aside and said "No!" But he did think he had a right to resent her lack of proper pride. If she had turned and rent him for his moody incivility he would have understood her; but she laid a burden on him by her ridiculous agitated acceptances of the part of miserable sinner. He found himself, saying angrily, "Is she a fool as well as a child?" and then, with a sinking of heart, "Is this truly the woman I married?"

He was unwilling to believe that he had been the victim of an illusion. His mind went back to the day of the garden-party and he saw again the silhouette of a gracious lady framed in green and gold. He saw her walk down the room beside him and turn and look at him and speak childishly, while in her eyes, like a lantern flashed round the walls of a well, an unknown emotion flickered and leaped and was gone again. He remembered how that look of hers had stayed by him like a lighted match flung into damp straw. He remembered his own impersonal curiosity as it warmed to itself fuel, and how he had wondered, "Will it burn or will it go out?" He remembered too his own marvelling delight when within him the fire began to burn and blaze, and the passion of gratitude that he had felt for the woman who made him feel. But now, it seemed, the gracious woman was no more than an illusion, a child masquerading in its elders' clothes, and as he discovered the illusion he felt the fires die down. He said to himself that he was growing old and cold, cold as the house he lived in; for his wife's impossible cousin was right in that—nothing warmed the house. He had never noticed in his life before how keen were the draughts, how stagnant the air of the corridors; but on his return from Sicily he had thought to himself uncomfortably that here was a chilly place to give a girl for a home! and had said

as much to his Antonina on the morning of their return—

"My dear, I hadn't realised how chilly we are at Babyon. England after Sicily would strike cold, of course, but it seems to me that the damp has got in. We must open up some of the closed rooms: and wouldn't you like painters and paperers? Wouldn't you like your drawing-room done up?" And then he had been surprised that he should have allotted to her the unfamiliar drawing-room where neither he nor his had ever sat, rather than the white parlour: and then thought again that after all the drawing-room was the best room in the house, a very handsome room: he would be very glad if Antonina used it: "Wouldn't you like the drawing-room done up? Choose your own paper—and anything else, of course, that you want done in the house."

But Antonina had protested that she preferred the white parlour and the long gallery to any drawing-room, and he was vaguely sorry. She had continued to protest that she loved the house as it was, that she wouldn't dream of wanting it changed: and he was vaguely glad and yet irritated by her protests. How could she love Babyon? She hadn't been there but a night! What was this absurd enthusiasm for a strange house? He had distrusted her ready enjoyment of his house.

When, later, they quarrelled, the memory of that distrust returned to him. Yes, he was back again at his old trouble: she was too eager to please: she was too willing to be pleased. She was such a nestling creature, and he hated to be touched. Yet he loved his Antonina: surely he loved his own wife? Would he have married her else? What was it then that leaped so eagerly out of him on the least occasion to deal a blow at the intruder, his wife? He could not understand himself: and he shivered because the house was so cold and because the estrangement between himself and his young wife brought back into his life the former aching sense of loneliness. Antonina had banished that sense of loneliness and want.

It had left him during the long days of his honeymoon only to return in a tune—

'Ha! hee-hee-hee!
Hee! ah-ha-ha!'

He thought that he had left the tune behind him in the hot foreign land; but no—it had travelled with him like the house spirit in the farmer's churn. It was already at home at Babyon, giggling in the rain, hissing in the fire, squealing in the opening of a door, sighing itself into silence in the sweep of his wife's dress. But its true lodging was not in the rain or the fire or the draughts of the swept and garnished house, but in his own brain, and he knew it—

'Ha! hee-hee-hee!
Hee! ah-ha-ha!'

And he knew that if you cannot get rid of a tune it will drive you crazy—

'Ha! hee-hee-hee!
Hee! ah-ha-ha!'

"Nina!" cried Nicholas, so suddenly, so sharply, that to a listener on the other side of a window-pane it might have seemed a call for help.

She looked up, her face lightening with joyful relief. He had no need to meet her half-way: she was out of her chair and on her knees beside him before he could speak again, and her arms were slipping round his neck—

"Dearest! Dear, darling Nicholas! I'm sorry I was maddening. I don't mean to be. Truly, inside myself, I'm not. Oh, you wait! I shall behave so beautifully quite, quite soon, Nicholas. Only wait for me till I get accustomed to being Lady Babyon."

She had hit it. It was strange how she always hit upon his thoughts, that he could not protect his naked thoughts

from the light accurate blows of her words. But she had hit it. He was glad to hear the loving human voice, but she wasn't his idea of Lady Babyon. He had known another Lady Babyon, type of what all true, gracious, faithful women should be, a woman suffering long and kind, enduring all things—and in silence. He had known such a woman. How then could he make a heart's companion of this ardent, facile child? And indeed, as he kissed her and laughed at her, he felt the keenest self-reproach because he had been exacting and harsh with the child. Yet she had hit it—"Wait till I get accustomed to being Lady Babyon—" She knew then that she daily failed him? If she knew it she was not altogether a child. Poor Nina! He put his arm round her—

"Are you cold, Nina? The room seems so cold."

"A little, Nicholas." She shivered and crept closer.

"I'm sorry, Nina, that——"

"Oh, Nicholas, dearest, it was all my fault."

Her quickness stopped him. He sought to explain to her his uneasy concern for her and himself and their mutual happiness; but if she was so easily satisfied—why then, leave it! And again he felt his disillusionment isolating him, drifting like a cold air between himself and her. He sat stiffly, not knowing what to do with her. The dressing-bell relieved him. He was able to put her away without unkindness and rise.

"Nina, we must go and change or we shall keep dinner waiting."

Why must she always meet him more than half-way?

But an evening came some four months later when it was his turn to meet her more than half-way. When Antonina came back from her shopping expedition and her night at Wimbledon, though she had only been away from him two days, he was struck by a change in her. Her new clothes altered her, he supposed; but he thought that she looked older, richer, graver, of a sudden. Her colour was bright and her beauty stirred him as they sat together

that evening. He was quite ready to talk to her and hear her news of London; but she said yes and no to him and was silent so long that he thought he would after all get his book again when, with her maddening trick of harking back to flaws and starts of their intercourse that he had long since decently put behind him, she began to say—

"Nicholas, do you remember when we quarrelled a little——"

He lifted his eyebrows—

"I don't think so."

"Oh, Nicholas, don't you remember? You said——"

He said quickly—

"Need we go back to that?"

She was troubled.

"Haven't you thought about it since? I have. It seemed so dreadful to quarrel with you. But, Nicholas, I told you to wait, didn't I?"

"Did you, Nina? Wait for what?" He did not know what she was talking about.

"Till I was truly a Lady Babyon." She leant forward and put a hand on his knee: "Nicholas, very soon now I shall be truly Lady Babyon."

He could not follow her thought; but he began to see that under her manner she was moved as deeply as he had ever known her.

"Truly, Lady Babyon, Nicholas—like the picture of your mother, 'Lady Babyon and her children'! I shall be that." Her smile shone out like a sun-burst. He began to understand and took her hand and would have spoken, but she went on—"Are you pleased, Nicholas? Do you remember, in Sicily once, you told me what you wanted most in the world? And now you're to have what you wanted." And then, with the flippancy that she always employed to help herself over an embarrassment—"And I'm not to use the dog-cart any more, my aunt says, because of the high step."

VI

Was he pleased! She could ask him that!

He did not know why, as he aged, he increasingly and so profoundly desired a child, a son of his own. It may have been the gipsy blood which came to him through his mother which gave him so strong a sense of the dignity of family headship, which exalted the mother above the wife: or it may have been the mere fact that he was the last master of an ancient house; but he did glimpse within himself a capacity for passions he had never felt. He knew that he could be a passionately anxious father, and he knew that he could worship, as the prayer-book bade him, not his wife but the mother of his son. He had also that sense of his own failure as manipulator of his own life which so often burdens the middle-aged. In a son he could see himself correcting his own failure. To have a son, he thought, was to be born again: there was no other resurrection.

And Antonina, his wife, who was to give him his life to come, could ask him if he were pleased!

He thought to himself—'Mother wouldn't have said a stupid thing like that to me—she wouldn't have gabbled at me, Mother.'

Suddenly his mind began running back down the years to her, left behind and lost for ever in his youth. He passed his milestones breathlessly, swerving aside with shut eyes from the summer morning of her death to pause by her at last alive in his past, alive and his companion, walking through his woods with him, a hand on his arm. He could hear her dearest voice, far away in time, and tiny; but clear as the voice of the far-away river winding round the foot of the cliff garden without—"I never had any one to talk to," and he could hear his own answer—"You have me now!"

And now he was the one who had no one to talk to, no one to tell of this joy come late into his life, as late

as joy had come into hers. If he could tell her—if he could only, by straining back his soul into the past where she stood forlorn, tell her his news—"Mother, I'm to have a son of my own. Mother, are you pleased?"

"Are you pleased? Are you?" Antonina was beginning again, an anxious note stolen into her voice that had been so full of triumph.

He stared at her dazed.

"Yes," he said at last, loudly: "I am pleased." And then, still more loudly, as if he were speeding his words to her over immense distances, "Very pleased. And about the carriage: quite right: you will have to take care of yourself. And you mustn't catch cold either. You ought to sit in the drawing-room, Nina, in your own drawing-room where it is warm. This room's too cold for you. Can't you feel how cold it is? There's always a cold draught in this room. Put out your hand."

The room might be cold, but his solicitude warmed her. Nevertheless, as, obeying him, she put out her hand, she believed that she could feel against her palm, between his face and hers, a chill barrier of faintly stirring air.

VII

As Lady Eype told her, not every woman with a baby coming was cared for as Nina was cared for. Not every husband was considerate as Nicholas was considerate. He gave in to all her wishes: he was careful for her comfort: and, to please her, denied himself his own habits of uncertain hours, sudden absences and unheralded returns. And if she tried him, he tried not to show it. Yet Antonina, whose observation was as quick and keen as her manner was clumsy, knew that she tried him, and knew why. The physical strain of her condition exaggerated her defects of manner, and exaggerated too the impulsiveness and the candour natural to her. Her affection for him had

always made it hard for her to hold herself in reserve; for she was a woman whose every speech must be a gift to a lover. Now her desire to give him the key to all the secrets of her personality at once was chequered by irritation, because he would neither take her key nor lend her his. And in her rueful petulance she fell back on teasing him as she would have teased a contemporary: and would have been wise, had he been a contemporary; for to fiddle at a neighbour's patience as if it were the trigger of a gun till the flash comes and an explosion ensues is the way to be intimate at twenty-three. But he was forty-seven: his was the mechanism of the seventies, not of the nineties, and so her endeavour to provoke him into unreserve had the wrong sort of success.

Yet in her most luckless moods she was always aware of his effort to make life easy for her, and began to understand and find comfort and a simplification of her problems in the strange fact that, though she might irritate him as an individual, he had a reverence for her because of her state, as if a child-laden woman must be half a saint. Young, inexperienced, unmothered, this attitude of his frightened her, though she loved him for it. She felt, guiltily, that he had a nobler view of life than she; that she, too, ought to be thinking of the child instead of rejoicing mainly at having pleased its father. She began to be ashamed also that she found the early months of motherhood so miserable a burden. She had never been ill in her life and now she felt daily more stupidly, meanly and sordidly ill. She wanted to be like all the Lady Babyons in the picture gallery, strong, with dignity, mothers of their race: and instead found it hard some mornings not to be a coward and cry as she dressed. And to all her agitations and distresses was added the problem that most concerned her, because she could not help loving her husband better than her unborn child. How was it affecting Nicholas? Nicholas was so patient; but suppose Nicholas was getting bored? She felt that Nicholas ought not to

be bothered with her and her health. Her aunt had always said—"Whatever happens, you must keep a man amused!"

How was she to keep Nicholas amused? It occurred to her brilliantly that though he did not like her relations, he was sure to like his own. Wouldn't it be pleasant for Nicholas if they asked one or other of his sisters down to stay? His eldest living sister, Caroline, had married while he was still a child and had gone to India as a bishopess: they had not met thrice since: and Adelaide was the successful wife of an east-coast vicar, too busy to leave her parish even for her brother's wedding. Then there was poor Anne, Nicholas's favourite, who had never been the same since she lost her husband in the Khartoum tragedy, but sat in her sitting-room day in day out, looking forth over the tamed Bournemouth seas, while she played with her brooches and her ear-rings and gave them away to her nurses and her maid, and asked for them again half an hour later.

"And nothing can be done?" cried Antonina, who must always be righting God's wrongs, when she heard the story.

"We tried what we could; but—time passes. She's nearly sixty. It's best to let her be," said Nicholas.

"Can you really lose your mind like that, from sheer shock? She must have loved him dreadfully."

Nicholas shrugged:

"She was fond of him, of course; but they said it might have come anyway, at any time. There's an odd strain in the Babyons, you know. It shows itself now and then."

"You don't mean——?"

"Not an inherited malady. But you can't get away from it, there *is* an odd strain. My grandfather now, Henry Babyon, he couldn't keep money."

Antonina laughed.

"That's not odd."

"Oh, not extravagance—mania! He half wrecked

Babyon. My father was the same. If it hadn't been for Mother——"

"Why, Nicholas, what could she do?"

"She pulled the estate together."

"Your mother did? But how could she?"

"Her father was a farmer. When she found out that my father had spent the very harvest before it was sown, then Mother—— But it's a long story."

"Tell me! Oh, tell me!"

"Well, she had money that he couldn't touch: and she had Riverhayes. She insisted on farming it herself and made a success of it. Actually, Antonina, she went in for cattle dealing, horse dealing: she went to the fairs and markets. She told me once what it cost her: you see, she—my mother was very shy. The farmers didn't like dealing with a woman; but she was Lady Babyon, and she used her title to make them: and presently they dealt with her because it paid them so well. Everything she touched made money for her. The farmers were superstitious about her: they said it was the gipsy luck. You know, there was a gipsy strain in my mother. And with the profits—what do you think she did with the profits? As fast as my father put a piece of the estate into the market she bought it, in my name. That was Mother!"

"But did your father let her?"

"Oh, my father!" said Nicholas. And then—"She had a much stronger character than my father."

"But, Nicholas—didn't your father——?" She was wanting to say—"Didn't your father and mother love each other?" but she stopped herself. "But did your father—mind?" she rephrased it.

"I never tried to understand my father's point of view," said Nicholas harshly. "He had a wife in a million and he never knew it. He only lived for himself. It was mania how he lived for himself and his pleasure."

"Then—" Antonina was tracing the invisible pedigree in the air with her forefinger—"when you say it was the

strain coming out, do you mean—you don't mean that he was mad, do you?"

He shrugged his shoulders—

"What is madness? There has been madness in one branch. There was a Hariot Babyon who was undoubtedly mad; but the strain died with her. They said of course that my great-grandfather shot himself, but—I doubt it. It's a fact that his horse took fright and galloped away with him, down the avenue and up on to the moor. He was found thrown and shot; but—a pistol was a cumbersome tool in those days; it may well have been accident. Still—there's an odd strain about the Babyons and sometimes it shows itself. My father was sane enough: there's no excuse for what he—left undone. But if I wanted to excuse him I should say to myself—'He was too much of a Babyon!' and leave it at that."

'But you then?' thought Antonina: 'What about you?' For if the father of Nicholas were too much of a Babyon, was not Nicholas more of a Babyon still? For she remembered Lady Eype saying that old Lady Babyon was a cousin of the house. She wondered that he could judge his fathers without a glance at himself. When he talked of the Babyons did he never think of himself? She expressed her wonder obliquely when she said—

"Was your sister Anne like your father then?"

The question interested him.

"I hadn't thought of it. I shouldn't be surprised. Unstable as water—— Yes, it may have been his instability that in Anne has degenerated. Poor Anne! But she's happy enough."

"Does she know you?"

"No."

Poor Anne! Poor mindless Anne—but happy enough! No past, no future, would ever destroy Anne's present: and she, too, was a Babyon: the only Babyon of them all, it seemed, who had ever known peace. 'There's an odd strain in the Babyons!' She wondered whence it came.

She saw it like an arrow shot at the Babyons, deflected often, but never arrested in its flight down the centuries, striking and glancing off to strike again at a tangent, now here, now there: striking always at their hearts' peace.

She had a sudden fear for her child. But Nicholas had said that the Babyon strain was neither malady nor madness: it could not hurt the body or the mind: it was a thing of the spirit. 'And surely, surely,' thought Antonina, 'though your body might master you, and your mind might fail you, yet you could always master your own spirit!' She would depend on herself to see to it that her child ruled its own spirit, so long as she could be sure of its body: and were not the Babyons strong and handsome? She had only to step over to the long gallery to look at them and be answered. As for the odd strain, all their oddnesses, working together, had ended in Nicholas—and if the child were like Nicholas what more could she desire for it? That the child might be handsome and strong like all the Babyons to please Nicholas, and like Nicholas to please herself, she must now keep her own spirit peaceful. But she could not be at peace unless Nicholas were enjoying himself. How was she to keep Nicholas amused? Poor mindless Anne could not answer any summons, and she was sure that Adelaide would get on all their nerves: there remained Lovisa! Why not ask his sister Lovisa to stay with them?

"Shall I, Nicholas? I should like to know Lovisa better."

He knew that she must be humoured: so he said that it was a delightful idea. She wrote the invitation and each prepared on the other's account, with a great assumption of cheerfulness, for the visit which neither desired.

VIII

Lovisa Maillard was a widow, five years older than her brother, and like him tall, with a high forehead, a

hooked thin nose and a precise mouth. But her eyes were of another blue than his: his dark-centred eyes could be as grey as pebbles, but her eyes never changed colour, were the soft filmy blue eyes, restlessly shuttling, of the female enthusiast.

The visit, Antonina felt from the start, was going to be a success, and Mrs. Maillard, too, thought that she had never before found it so pleasant to stay at Babyon. Nicholas was just the same as ever, taking no interest in serious conversation, but she liked his young wife, who reminded her, she said, of her own daughter: and she was fussily kind to Antonina, though she did not, of course, discuss Antonina's health or her hopes. She did not care for such a subject. She had been frightened and disgusted by married life, though she adored her baby when it came. She never had another, but she continued to adore her only daughter, encouraged her to marry early and gave her a good trousseau, tears, kisses, half her own income as an allowance, and no hint whatever of what a wife's duties might be. She had not been told: why should her daughter be told? You do not talk of these things. When, six months later, the beloved child came to her, a scared child, for advice, Mrs. Maillard, very red, told her that it was better not to talk about such things. Her daughter did not talk any more, and died because she did not: and Mrs. Maillard never forgave the young, distracted husband. If it had not been for him she would have had her daughter with her still. No doubt he would marry again. How hateful men were! She suffered cruelly, was for some years a lonely, bewildered, dogmatic woman, with a saint's smile and the opaque blue eyes of the female enthusiast: went to church regularly and found no comfort in her church. She thought of becoming a Roman Catholic and would have become one if, on a visit of duty to poor mindless Anne, she had not struck up a friendship with one of the bored nurses who taught Mrs. Maillard her own amusements of a solitary, teacup-reading, tarot-telling, planchette.

Planchette was an oval board with a pencil lightly fixed in it. Mrs. Maillard and the nurse put their hands on it together and it scrawled and twirled for a little while on the paper below, while the nurse said at intervals reverently, and then a little less reverently, and at last impatiently—"Is any one there? Who is there? Who are you?" till at last it wrote in a Germanish hand, with the m's and the r's and the l's all exactly alike, a scrawled word which Mrs. Maillard, breathless, joyfully weeping, made out to be 'menella.' Now Menella was her daughter's name—"though it was strange that she should write herself Menella," said Mrs. Maillard, "because we always called her Nellie!" But it was only on that first occasion that planchette wrote the name in full. Afterwards it was always 'Nellie.' Mrs. Maillard had not been two days at Babyon before she poured out the ten-year-old story to her sister-in-law, showed her the notebooks she kept and the exercise-books filled with the weakly, upright, Germanish hand—"Not in the least like my hand, you see!" and indeed Mrs. Maillard wrote in the slant of her school-days. She explained how planchette had been but the beginning of her new life, told of her settlement in London, of the circle of fellow-enthusiasts she had joined, of the nurse who had become, with Mrs. Maillard's help, a medium, a most successful medium, though at first she had taken no pay for displaying her powers—"but our friends convinced us—a labourer is worthy of his hire. Planchette wrote that for us. Not that I use planchette so much now: Nellie comes directly to me now. My dear, it's most wonderful. No sooner does the medium go into a trance—I don't care what medium—than my Menella comes. Direct control! She guides me in everything—yes, everything—even in buying my clothes. Why, the other day I had been to the sales and I picked up rather in a hurry a new hat, cheap—you know how one is tempted beyond one's strength sometimes when things are cheap—blue—a blue toque covered with blue roses, with a rather daring ar-

rangement tilting up the back, of blue velvet and a begonia—a scarlet begonia—smart; but a little—you know! However I bought it. Well, that evening I couldn't sit for some reason; but the next evening I had been sitting as usual with Nurse—I call her Nurse still—with Miss Dantry. She was in trance: nothing much came, though Nellie was there—Nellie's always there—when suddenly she said in Nellie's voice—'It shouldn't be red!' I said—'What shouldn't be red, Nellie?' I talk to her, you know, just as if Nurse weren't there. She wouldn't say—they never will say straight out—but presently she said again—'Not red. Red's a bad colour. Nellie doesn't like red. Make it blue.' And then, my dear, it dawned on me that she meant my hat: and it was quite true, my daughter always disliked red. So next morning I had the begonia taken out and forget-me-nots put in," said Mrs. Maillard happily.

Antonina, who devoured every fairy tale that she could lay hands on, from *The Golden Bough* to *The Sorrows of Satan* by Miss Corelli, was delighted with the new marvel. She had never come so near to touching enchantment and Mrs. Maillard had never had such a listener since Nellie married 'that man.' Mrs. Maillard began to think she had made a convert, for Antonina played tumbler-and-letters with her every evening, and planchette wrote them messages from Nellie and Nina's own father and mother whom she could not in the least remember: and when Margaret Eype came over to tea, Nina suggested that they should try to turn the immense mahogany table in the dining-room. But it would not budge for them: it would not even rap.

"Not enough force," said Mrs. Maillard: and then, wistfully—"I wonder if Nicholas——?"

But Nicholas, in his study at the end of the long upper corridor that balanced the picture gallery, appealed to by a whirlwind Antonina with red flags in her cheeks and eyes like stars, would not provide more force, would not come over and sit with them, thumb against thumb, and

little fingers laid against the little fingers of Nina and Margaret. Instead he said quite angrily as he looked up from his accounts—

"I haven't time; and if I had I wouldn't."

"Oh, but, Nicholas, why not?" Antonina's face fell. "You don't know how exciting it is. Suppose it did turn for us! Your sister's seen it turn. You don't think she'ld say what wasn't true?"

"I suppose not," said Nicholas.

"Well, then——" cried Nina: "Oh, do come!"

He smiled stiffly:

"That sort of thing really doesn't amuse me, Nina."

"But why not?"

He shrugged. She could have shaken him.

"Nicholas, I think you ought to be interested in things you don't understand. It's scientific. Whatever causes them, the phenomenon do happen—I mean, the phenomena. Lovisa thinks she talks to Nellie. I won't say it's Nellie. But something talks, Nicholas—sentence after sentence." She slipped down on to the floor beside him, forgetting Margaret and the table: "Nicholas, why are you against it? Do you think it's just fraud?"

"I don't think about it."

"But you must think something?" She frowned: her mind ran off at a tangent—"Nicholas, what do you think happens when we die?"

"How should I know?" said he.

"No, but what do you think? Nicholas, you do believe in life after death?"

"No!" said he.

She had asked her question lightly, out of the surface curiosities of her mind; but he did not speak from the surface: and she felt, as she listened to his 'No,' that he was taking away from her something immensely valuable that, until that moment, she did not even know that she had possessed. She reached, clutching, after the possession which he was so quietly taking away from her—

"But if there's no life after death, then I should lose you when you die: I should altogether lose you."

"Why, yes," said he.

"But I couldn't bear it," cried Antonina: "I tell you I couldn't bear it!" and she caught his coat sleeve and shook it as if she would shake him awake out of his mood, as if he were saying something in a dream that he must deny when he woke. "How could I live?" cried Antonina, "if you were dead and I thought I'ld never see you again?"

"You'ld live," said he. And then, harshly—"The dead go and are gone. We can't alter it. But—" his hand clenched on the table—"this calling them back with hymns and tables and trumpets—this masquerading in their names and putting namby-pamby into their mouths, can't you see how revolting it is? Lovisa with her 'Nellie, Nellie!' That won't end it either. If you go on as you do one day she'll be beginning to say 'Mother, Mother!' She'll be giving me pretended messages from my mother. She hasn't any decency: she's a fool without decency. And you encourage her. How you can do it, Nina! How you can do it!" He stopped speaking as suddenly as he had begun. His face was as grey as his hair.

Once more dismay rained down upon her out of a black cloud: she said with trembling lips—

"I'm sorry. I'm awfully sorry. I didn't know you felt like that about it. Of course I won't do it any more."

He said hastily, scrupulously—

"I'm not dictating to you. But you asked me what I thought."

"But I wanted to know what you thought," she cried. "Of course I wanted to know. D'you think I want to do what you don't like? I hadn't thought about it seriously, Nicholas. It was just a queer game."

Then he turned upon her, blazing—

"But you shouldn't play games with the dead," cried Nicholas: and his hands and his voice shook as he bent again over his work.

IX

She went away much sobered.

She had lived so completely on the surface of her twenty-three years that she had no standards by which to judge his outburst. She was orphaned too early to remember her dead parents with grief, and she had had no other losses. Nor had she any poisoned cuts, for she had never harmed any one as far as she knew: and no one certainly had ever hurt her. Life had been as clear and easy and fidgety as a bright spring morning with a teasing wind. No one had so much as puzzled her till she fell in love with her husband: now her husband hurt as well as puzzled her. She began ruefully to understand that to love him heartily was not enough to ensure his happiness or hers, that the overwhelming passion she had from the first felt, and still felt for him, though it might urge her into his arms and his life, did not necessarily give her the power to comprehend him. 'How you can do it!' His fury of disgust amazed her. She could not forget it, and she could not understand it. Her mind would not centre upon it, but beat to and fro between his horror at her tamperings with the world to come, and her horror at his suggestion that there might be no world to come. It was her common sense, not her religious sense, that he had outraged. She cried to herself indignantly—'But if he believes in nothing, why did he marry? What is the good of marrying for thirty years or so, if he and I die then and never see each other again, because we've puffed out like candles? And a child? What's the point of having a child just in order to leave it and never see it again? And the child has a child and leaves it and never sees it again, and so it goes on, like a wheel spinning on a jack. What's the point of it?' She flushed suddenly, her human dignity in arms: 'I'm not a reproducing machine! I'm better than that. I call it mad to think of life like that. There's no logic in it. It's the way madmen argue. He says the Babyons were just odd, but when he

talks like that it doesn't sound just odd, it sounds mad. Can't he feel when he thinks of me how wrong he is to think so? When I think of him I know I'm alive for ever, death or no death. You couldn't put out—death couldn't—God couldn't put out what I feel about Nicholas. My feeling lives. It's made the child live. But he doesn't feel it. That means then that he doesn't love me as I love him.'

A pang shook her at the thought; but she was always, as far as her capacity for self-judgment reached, honest with herself: she continued to formulate the torturing thought—'It's true! He doesn't love me as I love him. I'm beginning to see it. He's enough for me, but I'm not enough for him: that's why he wants the child. And when it grows up he'll expect things from it as he does from me, and it'll disappoint him as I do. And he'll go on wanting something vaguely that he can't get, out of life, and so he'll always be unhappy. But what is it he wants? He did want me: now it's the child. He won't look at me when he has the child!'

Then she shrank back from her own thought, crying—'If I let myself think like this I shall grow jealous of my own child while it's still in me, part of me. It's mad to think so; but Nicholas says mad things and I remember them. The house repeats them to me, I think. I love Babyon; but it's a crazy house for all that. It's not a bit like the house at Wimbledon. It feels as if it had been lived in, lived in, till it could go on living all by itself. It does, I believe. It did while we were in Sicily. I do ordinary things, like teasing Nicholas and writing planchette with poor Lovisa, only to please her, poor Lovisa, and the house twists them so that Nicholas doesn't see them as ordinary things. It twists Nicholas: it's twisting me. When we came back from the drive to-day, the shadow on the drive looked like a coffin, just the shape of a coffin. I never used to notice that. Going into the hall, so black and cold, was like going into one of those queer little house-tombs in the Campo Santo at Milan, with a chair

and table inside for visitors. Living people go there and sit there. But at night, do the dead pay each other visits? Do the Babyons pay each other visits when Nicholas and I are away, or asleep? Of course I know it's mad to think like that about my own home: but then, I'm half ill. They say you think all sorts of queer things and want all sorts of queer things when you're going to have a baby: there was the Duchess of Malfi and the apricots. I thought that so silly when I read it: what's control for? But now I know the feeling. Wanting! Dying with wanting! I'm dying with wanting Nicholas, the whole of him, all the years when I wasn't in his life. I want to be part of him and I can't because I'm so young. O God, give me trouble and sorrow and pain, that I may grow up quickly, quickly, and understand my Nicholas, and my own child when it comes?'

So she spoke to her soul as, in the evening quiet, she paced up and down the long gallery on her way back to her guests. She knew that they would wonder at her prolonged absence, but her heart was full and her spirit oppressed, and her body ached with the weight of the child: she felt she must have a breathing-space before she returned to the bright, white-walled parlour, to laugh and chatter and make comical excuses for Nicholas and herself.

For, whatever Lovisa might say, she did not mean in future to tell fortunes or practise automatic writing, twirl tumblers or find out if she were psychic, as they called it, in any of Lovisa's dozen ways. It simply wasn't worth it. She was thankful to have avoided telling Nicholas that Lovisa thought her a likely medium and had promised to take her to a séance. She still felt that it had been a harmless exercise of curiosity on her part; but now that she understood how Nicholas felt about the whole business, it was no longer harmless. Strange Nicholas! So quiet, friendly, composed, and underneath so tormented and ungraspable a spirit. What was it that Nicholas wanted?

As she sat down, fatigued and throbbing, at the table

by the window and began idly to scrawl dotted patterns, squares and circles, pot-hooks and profiles of Nicholas, with the pencil lying on the pad, the queer night scene of the week before came into her mind. The dinner-party for Lovisa had passed off so well, and Nicholas had brewed a punch—she liked to watch Nicholas play host—and Margaret and her brother and the panting Ley girls and the party from the Rectory had danced the Lancers and Sir Roger, and waltzed up and down in the gallery, while she sat here in this same chair watching them: and they had all been as gay as gay: she herself most of all. How she had enjoyed being Lady Babyon and giving a party, and wearing her skilfully cut, trailing dress! And Nicholas had come and gone, talking to Lady Eype and the Rectoress, and now and then had put a hand on her shoulder and whispered to her not to overtire herself, even with laughing. It had been indeed a successful evening: Nicholas had said so too. She had gone to bed tired out and happy; but in the middle of the night she had awakened with a start: Nicholas was not at her side. As her eyes grew accustomed to the grey light she had seen him, black in the windows, leaning on the sill, staring out: and she had slipped out of bed and pattered across to him bare-footed to look at the night with him: and then she had seen his face, the face of a stranger, and had cried out—

"What is it, Nicholas? Are you ill? What is the matter with you?" He had turned on her tranced eyes and said in a dull voice—

"Lonely."

She had stood beside him in an anguish of uncertainty, not daring to say—"But I'm here," and had crept away to bed again at last, and lain watching him till the room lightened and the birds began to sing. But then, then against her will, because her lids had grown so heavy and her mind so clogged that she could not hold on to her thoughts, even of him, she had fallen fast asleep.

She couldn't forgive herself that she had fallen asleep

when he was so unhappy. 'Oh,' she thought, 'how one is hampered by being young!' and so was back again at her old question, "How am I to satisfy him? What is it that he wants?" and searched the evening world for the answer that no human being seemed able to give her.

It was late and cold after a steamy day. The sun had long since slid down the sky like a curling-stone, scorching in its passage the western heavens to a dull brown. But already a moon paring silvered the east, while the zenith was clear lavender lighted by a star. Antonina watched a white owl throbbing up and down its nightly beat: it was so far away that its strong wings seemed no more effectual than the flutter of a moth's pinions. She knew the noiseless creature and had often watched it: it had the hunting of two outlying Babyon fields. But that night, though she saw it fly she could not see it strike, for the fields and the plain beyond and the gardens below her window were blotted out in swathes of thick white mist. Far hills and near tree-tops were like islands noiselessly engulfed by that white uprising effluence of earth. As it drifted nearer she felt its pure and clinging coldness. Invisibility touched her like a wet finger, rested upon her hair, cheek, clothing, a completed spell: and still, without, the whiteness rose and thickened. She thought that it looked like the spirit-stuff of which her sister-in-law talked so glibly—what was the word—'ectoplasm': and she could not take her eyes from this spectacle of earth in trance. As the necessary darkness curtained the materialisation, she could feel that Hecate and her hosts were thickening into forms.

She thought that she ought to call Lovisa and Margaret to see the wonder, but she was singularly disinclined to move, though she knew perfectly well that she must make the effort to move. What sort of a Lady Babyon was she to leave her guests in the lurch? She said aloud—"I will give myself five minutes and then I will go," and leant more heavily on her elbow staring at the night, while, barely controlled by her idle fingers, the pencil she held dotted

and scrawled upon the pad before her. She had a certain pleasure in manipulating pencil or pen, in broadening a downward stroke and lifting it again in a hair-fine thread—up and down—up and down—like breathing: now she began to scrawl her name over and over again—Nina—Antonina—Antonina Babyon—till the word Babyon ran off into a row of pothooks again as she ceased to govern the strokes with more than that tenth part of her mind which cared for her surface life. Yet that tenth part was pleased with the movement of the pencil and continued to direct its movement, while the rest of her consciousness fought the white blanket of sleepiness that was laming her will. She could no longer pin her mind to any one subject: it struggled and twirled and fluttered like a transfixed moth: she said—"I must go down! I must go downstairs," and before she could put her hands on the rests of the chair to lift herself from it, the word 'stair' had dropped its 'i' and was become the solitary star in the zenith of the dark blue haze. She was enchanted by the winking eye that was a star and wondered when its fellow-eyes would join it. '"O's and eyes of light"—that was in *A Midsummer Night's Dream!*' thought Antonina. The stars come out and go in like people, people of the night, with two stars apiece for eyes, twin eyes, like the twin babies in the picture on the wall—the dead babies, the sisters of Nicholas, in the arms of his dead mother. If his mother had been alive what would Nina have called her—'Lady Babyon'? She couldn't say 'mother' to a stranger. But if she called her Lady Babyon what a confusion there would be! "Call Lady Babyon!"—Lovisa might say to a maid: and no one would know if Antonina or her mother-in-law were meant. You couldn't have two Lady Babyons in a house. But when her baby was born, she, Antonina, would be painted too, with her baby in her arms. She wondered—'Who would the baby be like?' Not like her, she hoped. It ought to be like Nicholas or his mother, who had a beautiful face; at least, the mask was beautiful. But behind the mask

she saw quite clearly—it was as if she were looking through the slits of the mask—that it was a frightened, hating face. She had never before understood that Lady Babyon hated her, the new Lady Babyon, because she had to give up her name to Antonina. Antonina was Lady Babyon, and Nicholas belonged to Antonina: and the earlier Lady Babyon was only a painted face holding long-dead children in her arms and hating Nina because the child of Antonina and Nicholas was alive and soon to be born. Hate—that was the look behind the mask, the hate of the hungry for the fed, the hate of the prisoner for the free. Sheer hate was striking out at her from the walls, not from one wall, not from one picture, but like many arrows shot at her from all the walls of the room at once. Every picture in the room was alive and hating her—leering Medea, mocking Isabella, Menella tense and fearful, and, directing all, mad Hariot Babyon in her mulberry gown.

X

The pencil fell on the floor with an odd sound like the crack of a falling latch. Her whole body jerked into wakefulness with the terrible recovery of balance that is the end of a falling dream. She was instantly aware that she had had a momentary loss of consciousness. Her head ached violently, so did her right wrist. For an instant she thought she had been dreaming that Nicholas called to her. She had a confused recollection of a voice like the voice of Nicholas, but softer, more feminine; but in the return to the surface the thought had been jerked clean out of her mind: it left a faint sting behind, as lost thoughts or unshed tears will do. She groped painfully and in vain after the lost impression. She peered down the gallery after it, as if its departure were a bodily one; but the gallery was like a black tunnel. The white dusk prolonged the daylight without, but it could no longer light the interior, and the moon

was still faint and low. She could hardly see her own scrawls on the spoilt white paper as she ripped it off the pad and felt blindly for the waste-paper basket below the table: then checked her hand and leant into the window-seat that it might be easier to read. For a line of fierce black writing zigzagged now across it in a childish exaggeration of her own hand. The pale bemused scrawlings were obliterated by the huge characters: they cut into the paper, tearing it in two places, and the pad beneath was deeply dented. By holding the sheet close to her face she read it easily enough—

'Consider—consider—' it ran: and then, with the words running into each other—'consider the loneliness of the corridors of thought. Consider the delight of devils that frustrate birth!'

She stared at the characters in complete bewilderment and let the paper flutter out of her hand on to the table.

"What on earth——?" began Antonina. Then—"It's what they call automatic writing! How excited Lovisa would be—not that I'ld ever tell her. Nicholas is right—this sort of thing isn't nice: it's a horrible feeling, that such thoughts can come out of me when I'm half asleep. 'The devils that frustrate birth?' What a queer phrase! It can't be me. I'ld never think of such a thought if I lived to be a hundred. 'Frustrate birth——?' When was I reading of some one who was jealous, who hated—hated birth? Or I dreamt it? I did dream something."

She looked up, scared, excited, puzzled, and once more the portrait of the mother and children caught her eye: and at sight of that blank face, so smooth and expressionless, the recollection that had been fluttering beyond her reach let itself be caught. She remembered what she had forgotten and her sleepiness was dissipated in a flash of fear. She began to think with a hectic clarity—

"I did write it. It's what you call my inside self—the dweller in the innermost, like Watts' picture, warning me of danger. This comes of tampering—— Nicholas is right.

You mustn't play games with the dead. I wish Nicholas were here: the other end of the house is such a long way off. 'Consider the loneliness—' That's what's the matter with Nicholas—lonely—he said so! 'The loneliness of corridors—' I've got to get all down the gallery in the dark—a corridor of thought—a dreadful corridor—I've got to run down it and get away before they get hold of me, all these people in the room, these devils in the room—for they are, they are devils! Devils—devils—devils! They're jealous of my baby—that's it! They've taken Nicholas and now they're after my baby!" And with that panic took her by the throat. She began to scream—

"Nicholas, where are you? Come to me, Nicholas!" Her cries filled the darkness: "Nicholas, come here! I'm frightened. I want you, I want you, Nicholas!"

She might want. Her husband was shut in his room, and though it seemed to her that the whole house must be echoing with her screams, another part of her knew and it added to her terror to know, that her voice, in that stranglehold of panic, was become a mere whisper, a scratch of sound that made no mark upon the invisible darkness. She ceased, and heard the silence advancing upon her once more, and cast a desperate glance at the window, only to realise that on all sides she was beset. For, without, the mist was level with the sill. It was still rising and soon would flow in, an embracing, monstrous whiteness, while within doors the darkness seethed towards it. She stood quite still, receiving in advance with a shrinking skin touches out of the darkness; but all the while she said to herself, "Go slowly. Go straight forward, down the room, slowly, and don't be frightened, because there's nothing to be frightened at," and advancing, because something struck her, screamed again, one short sharp scream: and then realised that it was she herself who had struck against the knobbed corner of a frame upon a wall. She had completely lost her sense of direction and, instead of walking down the long gallery, had run up against the vast picture

of Medea that hung upon her right. She shuddered backwards from the watching face of that witch, faintly visible, blackly colourless. Where was the way out? Where was the curtained arch, and the lighted landing and the stairs beyond? She could see only darkness. She swung round to find the window and it was not where she thought, and once again she stood still and said to herself, fighting her fear—"Don't let yourself get frightened, Nina! This is only like waking up in the night. The windows are always somewhere else when you wake up in the night. Now look! Look round you quietly."

She looked round her quietly: and there was the window just where it ought to be, the great window where Nicholas had told her his mother used to sit. The momentary moon, rising but to set, shone in and silvered the empty chair and threw a faint light upon the cold mask of Lady Babyon and her lifeless babes upon the wall. It was all just as usual.

Antonina put out a shaking hand and caught hold of the frame that held Sir Henry's wife, harmless Sophia; for she knew her way now: next came Sir Henry and his mother, the simpering Caroline, with her blue ribbons and bleached posy: and then Ludovic, and Isabella whose eyes glittered. She thought she could see them glittering in the moonlight half-way down the length of the wall, only to know that it was fancy; for the moonlight, mist-smothered without, within was swallowed by the black tunnel of the corridor and did not light a yard of it. But she could feel her way down the wall by the pictures and there was nothing whatever to be afraid of, because she had only to think quietly to know that she had long since, long since conquered that terror of the dark which had made her childhood a torment: she had only to remember that she was not a child, but Lady Babyon in her own house. There was nothing whatever the matter, except that she was shivering so that she could hardly get herself along, shivering as if she were herself reading ghost stories. She hadn't read

ghost stories for years, but she remembered them all, all together, and the illustrations to them all, and the one that had sickened her nights most of all. She had found it in a *Royal* or a *Strand*—the story of a woman in a picture who used to lean out of her canvas and strike at the passers-by. This was Sir Ludovic whom she was passing: and another Lady Babyon and her husband. Now there was only the portrait of the mad Hariot Babyon between her and the door.

What was that?

The frame, under the pressure and weight of her hand, had tilted upward and forward so that the canvas brushed her face, and she swerved back from it, shrieking—"She hit me, Nicholas! She hit me!" and flung herself blindly at a darkness which she took for the curtains of the entrance, and found herself brought up short by a wall and, dizzy with the blow, turned with outstretched hands, only to beat once more against the invisible pictures, only to be brought up once more against the frames of the invisible pictures. She lost her direction as a soul loses its salvation, and no guidance issued from the square of night that had been a window a moment ago. She could not even find it as, up and down, to and fro, round and round, and up and down again, she ran the gauntlet between the dead Babyons.

It was mere chance that she battered herself at last against a darkness that gave her no dazing blow but yielded to the weight of her body. There was a jangle of rings and the hook supporting the light rod gave way under the sheer weight and violence of her clutch. The curtains came down with a rush. She tore her way through them, and tripping in the folds, recovered her balance, sped on, trailing the curtains still, tripped a second time as the stuff swathed itself about her ankles, caught at the stair-head and sent instead the Chinese vase that stood upon it crashing into the hall below, reeled, caught at a banister, missed, and so pitched finally and fell headlong down the

main staircase, to lie in a heap on the small square landing outside the door of Isabella's room.

Golden light flooded her as doors opened below and Margaret ran out, Lovisa behind her. To the right of the minstrels' gallery more light shone as Nicholas came hurrying down the corridor.

"Who is it? What is it? Nina, are you hurt? Dear child—can you move? How did you fall?"

She fended them off—

"Don't touch me! Call Nicholas!"

Nicholas was already there: and though she cried out she let him raise and support her head and shoulders.

"My dear, are you hurt?"

"Yes," she muttered, "I am hurt. They meant to hurt me." She began to sob pitifully.

"It must be her head," said Lovisa in a low voice: "she doesn't know what she's saying."

"I do know what I'm saying. They hurt me: they tore me to pieces: they're tearing me still." Her voice rose to a scream—"Oh, my baby!" cried Nina—"they're hurting my baby!"

"Don't try to lift her, sir!" said an elderly maid hastily.

Nicholas turned a face of death on the huddle of servants—

"Put-to the horses! Go for the doctor! Bring him back with you! Hurry!"

"They're hurting it," wailed Antonina, in a huddle against his knees.

XI

As the specialist told Nicholas, the disaster was not irretrievable. Lady Babyon had the advantage of a very fine physique, normal and healthy in ever respect. But there had been injury, not to speak of shock. Time was needed to repair the injury and still more the shock. Lady Babyon must go gently, gently, as he had already ex-

plained to her. Let there be patience: two or three years' care and rest and—who knew—Lady Babyon might yet be a joyful mother of children. But at present we go gently! It might be as well for Sir Nicholas to have a talk with Lady Babyon later, a reassuring talk, you understand?

Sir Nicholas understood. But though the days went by and Antonina grew strong and well again, still Nicholas did not find his moment for that reassuring talk.

They had carried Antonina on the night of the accident into the small room opening on to the landing where she had fallen: and in the four-poster with the red hangings she had fought her battle and won it, emerging from a black night of pain and a confusion of voices that began sentences of which she could never hear the end, into a twilight state between sleeping and waking, when she lay for hours staring at the Chinese paper walls and the writing-table in the window and the carved posts of her bed. She remembered her accident with sufficient clearness, and was always begging every one who spoke to her not to let Sir Nicholas know that she had been frightened of the dark at her age—and please, please, not to tell Sir Nicholas that she had broken his vase. A week later her brain cleared and she asked for her child, listened to the nurse's answer and never spoke of it again; but, as if the shock of the news had released a store of energy in her, she now began consciously to get herself well and within two months was up and about, had packed off her nurses and resumed the reins of government. But she still used the room on the stairs that was called indifferently Miss Isabella's room or Sir Jamie's room, though none of the maids knew who Miss Isabella or Sir Jamie might be. She said to Nicholas that the stairs tried her, pausing as if she hoped for a comment. She was always eyeing him doubtfully in those first days of her return to health and daily life, and pausing as if she hoped for a comment. He seldom gave her one; but he was assiduous in his care of her, and she would say feverishly, "Thank you—oh, thank you, Nicholas!" as if

the chair set for her or a cushion at her back were acts of forgiveness: and he would fidget away from her thanks.

And indeed, as the dull days went by and autumn dragged damply towards winter, she began to feel as if he were always fidgeting away from her. She knew, of course, that he loved her and meant to be kind to her: if she had not been sure of that, she told herself, she might have been unhappy: and then, as the days passed, she owned to herself that, sure or not, she was unhappy. She had not thought it possible that such accidental little things could cause her such intense pain; for she persisted to herself that it could not be anything but chance that made him overlook the empty chair near her and choose the window-seat instead, or miss her glance at him when a caller bored or amused her: or leave untouched a new book she had recommended; but she thought, as she watched him, that, accidental as it all was, he would nevertheless break her heart for her at this rate without ever knowing: which made her laugh again at her own childishness; for it was well known to her that a heart is broken by big things—battle, murder, sudden death—not because a husband looks at his wife with remote unfriendly eyes when, at the end of a silent meal, she at last thinks of something to say and says it—

"Nicholas, the Eypes have asked us to lunch tomorrow."

"Have they?"

"I met Margaret in the village. I said I must ask you first."

He said nothing. He had risen from the tea-table and was as usual departing with his dry air of duty done. She called to him—

"Are we to go, Nicholas?"

"Do you want to go?" said he.

"Why, it's just as you want, Nicholas!" said Antonina anxiously.

He waited.

"Do we go, Nicholas?"

"It's just as you prefer," said Nicholas.

"I don't want to go unless you want to go," said Antonina hastily.

"I don't mind one way or the other," said Nicholas.

She felt as if she must soon begin to cry. It was the last of a series of such conversations from which, whenever they were together, it seemed impossible to escape. She thought that he was ingeniously tormenting her, though why he did it or how it was that the discussion could be such a torment, she could not understand. She said forlornly—

"Then we had better not go, perhaps?" But she could not resist turning it into a question: not because she wanted to go, but because she wanted an expression of opinion—irritation, anger, the curtest of refusals, anything but this mask of acquiescence which hid his face from her.

"Had we?" said Nina.

"Very well," said Nicholas, and opened the door.

She said quickly, awkwardly, nervously—

"Oh, Nicholas, don't go! Are you going away again at once? I've hardly seen you all day. Nicholas—dear?"

He hesitated in the doorway: and she went across the room to him and put her hand on his arm—

"Nicholas——" Her voice failed her. She was suddenly so desolately aware of the immense gulf between them. She had meant to say eloquent things to him, but now she could do no more than cry to him across that widening void—"Nicholas—Nicholas!"

"What is it?" said he, meeting her look with one that shocked her, so hard was it, so hostile, so blank. She might have been his bosom enemy from his look. Her hand dropped from his arm.

"Nothing," said Nina, overwhelmed: "I only thought perhaps you might want to be with me."

Then she saw that he could hardly control himself. Some passion, terrible and inexplicable to her, raged within him and convulsed him. His voice was not recognisable as he said—

"It isn't possible—not now—I—I——" and broke off, hesitated a moment, and then went out, shutting the door behind him.

She stood staring at the empty place where he had been in such a bewilderment of anger and pain that she could scarcely breathe. She felt stabbed. She said weakly, aloud—"But what has happened to him? What have I done? There's a devil in him. He's hurting me on purpose. There's a devil, a devil in him." The tears began to roll down her cheeks and she presently abandoned herself to weeping; but she got no ease from her tears though she did exhaust herself, though exhaustion was like a leaden cope that settled crushingly down upon her. Instead, in that exhaustion following on tears, she tasted for the first time misery of spirit.

She had known, in the eight months of her married life, what it was to be uneasy, anxious, distressed. She had suffered fright and physical pain, and the loss of her child was an unhealed wound: nevertheless her youth and vitality made it not impossible for her to put her troubles behind her. Wounds healed cleanly with Antonina: she had healthy flesh: she could cry in the night for her lost baby and yet with her whole soul rejoice when the sun rose, in the knowledge that she had still her life before her with Nicholas. The loss of the child was a grief; but she shared it with Nicholas: she could bear any grief that was shared with Nicholas. But if her husband would not share joy and grief with her, then she was lost indeed. To live at all she must love and be loved. And she was beginning to understand that the love which Nicholas had shown her was spent. She began to realise that her husband had not felt for her familiar love. She said to herself—"Now I have seen passion: the fire that dies. Oh, poor Nicholas, how cold and miserable he must feel! So do I. I could let myself go so numb that nothing mattered to me either, if I were fool enough. But what a lot I am learning!"

For in that state of numb misery she began to look back

over her marriage and con once more her lessons in love, passion, happiness, tact, humour, pain, grief and hate. Yes, she had actually learned, in the last months, that hate was a fact like passion: no affair of books. She had learned what a cold thrusting sword of destruction hate could be, though she had learned it only through nightmare, through the half-forgotten nightmare of the picture gallery two months ago. Yes, she had eyes in her head: she could learn even from a dream, and yet not take her dream more seriously than a sober woman should. The momentary nightmare of devils in the gallery had been but an hallucination born of the state of her body: she knew that well enough. Yet—yet—yet—said her probing, searching brain—that nightmare of dead hate had killed her living child; so strong can hate be, even in a dream, even in a nightmare born of ill-health and excitement, mere nightmare to be put out of a sane woman's mind with all the other cruel evils that lurked at Babyon and lay in wait, the draughts slinking round her feet and striking up at her like little hates, the bloomless, steel-cut rhododendron walk, the shallow stairs so easy to slip upon, the panelled cold rooms that shut a woman in. Most dreadful were the panelled doors that matched the walls: once shut, they made themselves invisible, crying at you in the dark, "Find the way out now if you can!" That was Babyon, a house of hateful traps and snares and illusions! Oh, how she hated Babyon!

But on that thought she checked appalled. Hate Babyon? Hate the wide sun-baked gardens, the cliff side, the lordly outlyings, the owl in the meadow, the far hills, the farm by the river and the secure aged house that framed and enhanced the central figure of her husband? Hate the very empire that she had first remotely admired as an alien, then coveted as every woman covets her lover's home with an eye that says, "Perfect! Adorable! Unique! And oh, what changes I will make!" Hate Babyon, to which she had returned at last, a consort so happy that she no longer

wanted to make changes? Hate Babyon Court? As soon hate Nicholas!

Hate Nicholas? Once again the gulf yawned before her. To hate Babyon was to hate Nicholas! She looked down upon the black polished floor on which she stood as if it were the very gulf that she saw within her spirit: and saw her own vague reflection in it doubled by a trick of the window lights into a pair of Lady Babyons, vague and faceless, crying, "Hate Babyon! Hate Babyon!" and behind that one clear and second less clear shape, a dozen shapeless fragments of shadows dappling the glassy wood, swaying in the draughts of the room to a voiceless rhythm of—

'Hate Babyon! Hate Babyon!
Hate Nicholas! Hate Babyon!'

She swayed her body with them for an instant, mad to join the dance, the dance that, she now perceived, had its proper tune—

'Ha! hee-hee-hee!
Hee! ah-ha-ha!'

Her soul, as she swayed, was surrendering to strange calls and cries, welling from the deeps of the gulf beneath her feet, men calling, women crying, a baby wailing.

"Hee! ah-ha-ha!"

"Hate Babyon!"

"Widowed! Widowed!"

"Cain—Cain—Cain!"

"I have you now—you now!"

"Ha! hee-hee-hee!"

"Jump! Over and down!"

She leant forward in her mind, trembling on the dizzy brink of that whispering gulf of hatred and hunger, her soul braced for the jump over and down, as she stared into hell: and she tasted already in anticipation the rapture

of the headlong fall, when, out of the confusion of voices a single call struck upon her ear, a human and familiar cry of "Nina!" It did not come from the deeps over which she leaned; but upon the gulf's farther brink a silver mist gathered, and her husband's face rose out of it and looked at her with unguarded eyes, and his lips moved in a call for help.

How long is a look? How much power is in a look? Between the impress of that look upon her dreaming spirit and its fading, she had taken her decision.

"Hate Babyon!"

"Hate Nicholas!"

"Hate all of us!"

"Over and down!"

The final urgencies of the Pit steamed up and about her. She stepped back, her fingers to her ears.

"I will not hate!" cried Antonina, gasping for breath.

The room cleared with her movement. The floor was a floor again. She was standing absurdly in the middle of it, looking at her own single reflection, her fingers to her ears. The winter-lighted room was void of shadows. Very quiet was the room and the house. But still she was sure that somewhere in it Nicholas was calling—"Antonina! Nina! Nina!"

She opened the door and went away up the stair and along the corridor to find him, sure at last of herself and her duty.

XII

"Nicholas!" said Nina.

He was sitting in the window at the end of the picture gallery, a book on his knee, but he was not reading. Some movement in the gardens below had caught his ear and fixed his gaze. Watching him from the curtained entrance she thought he looked tired and old: for a moment she was dimly conscious that when he looked up and saw

her there she would seem to him a cruel figure because she was in a body so young. Yet she had never felt less young, never seen more clearly that age is a matter of the body, and that her grey, lined husband with his grave tread, his assured manner, his solitary habits, his air of taking charge resentfully of his own affairs, concealed a child enduring detention and exposure to the photographer, with resentful good manners. Then he did look up, with just such a repelling look as she feared to see. But because her movements were more leisurely and her speech more measured than common, his inevitable instant thought—'Will she never leave me to myself?' was followed more quickly than usual by the reaction—'I ought not to leave her alone so much!'—and there was more of the second thought than the first in his voice as he said—

"Do you want anything, Nina?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I do. I do rather. I came after you. Nicholas, are you really busy? Because, if not now, you must make time for me later. There are things I must say."

"Better say them then," said Nicholas, with a glint of humour.

As he looked up at her, standing tall before him, his jealousy left him and he had a pulse of pride in her handsome youth. Making room for her on the seat beside him, he was vaguely disturbed that she did not give him one of those quick gestures of affection with which she said 'thank you' to him, unnecessarily, for courtesies. Looking up at her, he found her unfamiliar, and it occurred to him that maternity, though tentative and unfulfilled, had nevertheless left its mark upon his wife. She was not so young after all. Indeed, as she looked at him intently, she was suddenly and startlingly his own age. To that unlooked-for statement of maturity he instantly responded, without the air of indulgence to another sex and another time of life which it had once amused him and now so burdened him to assume.

Said Nicholas uneasily—

"I'm afraid I was abrupt just now. I must have sounded—I—my thoughts were elsewhere."

She nodded. He watched her.

"Did you really want me?" said Nicholas, his tired voice kindly. "Is anything the matter?"

She flashed into speech, darting after his phrase like a swift after invisible quarry—

"That's it! Is anything the matter, Nicholas? Because I think there is. I've been thinking so for weeks—oh, and longer."

He shifted uneasily in his seat.

"My dear—you must have your imaginings, mustn't you?"

"About you? Yes. I must imagine, because you don't tell me anything about yourself. You set me to guess, and when I guess wrong you think me so stupid."

His eyes lit in angry surprise: also he was hurt.

"I've never said or hinted——"

"Oh, but you think it. Of course you do. I suppose I am stupid too; but at least I always know when it happens—a stupidity! You think I don't see when I tread on your toes. Oh, I do; but not in time to stop myself. But if you would help me I could learn, Nicholas. But you won't help me. It's so strange to me that you won't help me."

She waited. He did not help her. Stealing a look at him she saw that he no longer looked at her, that his eyes were fixed on distances that he did not see, and that his face was rigidly set: the face of a man long pursued, at the end of his course. She perceived that he did not help her because he could not help her, that he himself was more desperately in need of help than ever she and her sorrows could be. The familiar aching desire rose up in her to comfort him with caresses; but she was learning wisdom. She ran her own course, parallel, never touching his, knowing that so she eased him.

"Nicholas, I am very unhappy."

"I know," said he painfully, without looking at her.

"We both are. Aren't we?"

He nodded, docile.

"What has happened to us, Nicholas? We were happy at first. Or weren't you? Weren't you happy with me on our honeymoon?"

Then he turned to look at her, and the pity for her in his eyes added to her grief.

"Yes, I was happy, Antonina," said he.

She worked it out.

"Yes, you were happy. But now—gone—isn't it?"

"Gone!"

"Nicholas—why?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear, what do we gain by tormenting ourselves? It's gone."

She said with difficulty—

"It's not gone for me. You've changed, but I haven't. Indeed I haven't, Nicholas."

"I know that," he said.

"Then if it's gone, it is you who must tell me why. I ought to know why. Is it because I was ill? Because of——"

He cried out—

"For God's sake, leave all that alone!"

But now she could not control her tears:

"Nicholas, Nicholas, it was my child too. You wanted it most; but do you think it hurt you so much more to lose it than it hurt me? D'you think I don't want our children? Nicholas, listen to me! It needn't be the end of things. Three years—four years—it's not long: and then, when I'm stronger again——"

"Never," said he.

She looked up at him in horror—

"What? Are we to be strangers because it died? It was my fault, I suppose. Do you think I don't know how you blame me? But you see, I was frightened. The dark frightens me, Nicholas: and it grew dark so quickly. I couldn't

help falling. Nicholas, look forward, don't look back! Nicholas, we can still have beautiful children."

He turned upon her the face of a stranger. The restraint of his voice was awful to her.

"I'm forty-eight now. Three years—four years—I shall be more than fifty. And when my son is fifteen I'll be an old man to be judged and endured and hated! I know well enough how a boy feels to an old father. No one shall look at me like that, nor shall you look at me as my mother looked at my father." His voice changed. He softened: "Children? No, it's too late, Nina!"

She cried passionately, aghast at him—

"It's not! D'you think my children, *my* children, wouldn't love you? What has age to do with it? If you grow older, so do I. How can you be too old for me when you aren't now?"

He said—

"I am too old for you now, Nina! There's the whole trouble."

Her anger died like a straw flare: she turned to him in an anguish of reproach, crying—

"That's cruel! That's cowardly! You know that's not the trouble. When you loved me you didn't say 'too old,' and you didn't think so either. It's because you've stopped loving me that you say it. Isn't it that? Tell me the truth, Nicholas! I won't be angry with you. Tell me! Somehow or other it's just left you, hasn't it? I just bother you. I'm a—mistake you made. While there was the child you deceived yourself; but now—over! And that's why you say 'too old to have children.' It's because you don't love me any more."

She felt, as she spoke and looked at him, that though her own pain might excuse to any judge her cruelty to him, to herself nothing could excuse it: and knew, too, that he would, to his dying day, never forgive her cruelty in forcing him to face miserable facts, nor understand the sickening it wrought in her own heart to be so cruel

to him. He would think that she hated him, she who had seen hate and rejected its pleasures. But she did not falter. She knew what she had to do. She drove on—"Tell me, Nicholas! I've got to know."

He answered her then: and she heard with a 'thank God' and a heavenly respite from pain, the true Nicholas speaking—

"Nina, if there were any conceivable thing that I could do for you to lessen, to put right——"

She broke in—

"Nicholas, will you tell me something? Will you not think me prying into your secrets if I ask?"

He said—

"I'll tell you anything I can."

"What made you want me—in the beginning?"

He turned in his seat and stared down the long gallery.

"I thought you were—some one else——" he broke off: "I think I can't explain it."

"Try!" said Nina, in her choked soft voice.

His eyes darkened as they fixed themselves upon the picture upon the wall in front of them—

"You wouldn't think it, but I was like you, Nina—I always wanted some one to talk to," said Nicholas. "It began—I can't remember when it began. I was too small. But I never had any one to talk to. I was the youngest anyhow, but my sisters never talked. We were all—wary of each other. Home was the enemy's camp—Father and Mother—enemies—to us and each other. My sisters were married off, one after the other, in their teens: and then the house *was* quiet. Mother used this room. I used to play here. Father came in sometimes: I can hear him now, marching up and down, shouting: and Mother sitting, like that—oh, much older, but like that!" and he pointed suddenly to the portrait upon the wall—"and she used to say—'No, I can't! No, I can't! No, I can't!' like a machine for talking. They never took any notice of me. But Mother, after he'd finished and gone——"

"Yes?" said Antonina.

"Her face—it was as if she took a mask off her face."

"A mask. I said so," whispered Antonina.

He looked down at her, looked long.

"Yes," said Nicholas, "you said so—here—that day. I couldn't get it out of my head. I thought—is it possible that she understands? It was the first time that any one, from the outside—no-one understood her."

"But you did," said Nina.

"I didn't. She wanted it more than anything in the world—understanding. My father starved her. I tell you he shut her up in a prison and I never helped her out. I used to sit here in the window-seat, reading fairy-tales. There's a story of a girl weaving a shirt of nettles on her way to be burnt: and even when the flames are licking her feet, still she—" he hesitated, choosing, as if he knew no better one, the stilted phrase out of the book—"weaves salvation for the enchanted brother. That was my mother. She wove nettles all her life, so that I, you see, I—I," cried Nicholas, his face distorted—"I should be rich and free and happy. And I was glad to get away from her: I was glad to go to school. I hated my home. But the year before she died I began to find out things. My father was out of it, thank God! She was alone here: she talked to me, told me things. I had some one to talk to. Then she died. Then I knew what I'd lost. D'you know what I'd lost?"

She knew.

"Love," said Antonina.

"Love," said he. And then—"She died when I was seventeen. Seventeen—twenty-seven—thirty-seven—forty-seven——"

"Thirty years," said Antonina.

"Thirty years. I don't know what I've done with them. I've kept the place going——"

She said in her troubled small voice—

"Nicholas, have you had no fun at all out of your life?"—and so made him smile at her.

"As much as most, I expect. But I wanted—I used to think—I hoped—and then one day I woke up and found myself forty-five: and there I was, nothing done! Just a case of marking time till——"

"Till what, Nicholas? What was it that you wanted?"

He leant his head against the pane and stared down the length of the room—

"My grandfather built this room. There was a great stone pile—you know the heap still left at the end of the garden——"

"I did want to make a rockery there," said Nina.

"It was the material for a new wing. It had lain there a couple of centuries, they say. Most of it was useless. However, it set my grandfather on to building this room, and that led to refronting the house. I don't know why I'm telling you all the little details; but they've always amused me."

"Oh, and me too!" cried Nina.

"I used to play here most of the day. But at night—" he stirred suddenly—"I used to dream I was lost in here."

"I thought you never dreamed," cried Nina, seizing as usual upon the immaterial.

"I don't. But there's always been this dream. I have to go down the gallery, and as I walk it lengthens and lengthens. It's a corridor that never ends. But if I could get there, to the other end of the corridor, behind the curtain——"

"Yes?" breathed Nina.

"There's some one waiting for me on the other side. The other side, that's safety, that's peace, and some one I want. But I never get so far. Something gets in my way."

"A picture?" said Nina.

He raised his head astonished.

"How do you know that?"

"I guessed. Go on!" said she.

His thoughts withdrew him from her.

"It's strange you should guess that," said he, ceasing to find it strange. "It is a picture—oh, more than one.

Each of them in turn steps out and bars the way so that I can't get along. They catch at my hands and my shoulders. I wade through them like a tide that has turned against me. I've got as far as Hariot down by the door, but I never get out. Always as I get to Hariot I wake up."

"Are you always dreaming it?" said she.

"It comes in batches. That's why I go away so often. It's not gipsying. I have to get away from it. I do get away too. I'm a different person. Life's enjoyable. And then, some little thing happens. I see something, I hear something—it was an alley in Canton once with the shop signs hung out to right and left of me—I've known a waterway in Greece do it to me, just looking at the straight cliffs that went on and on, a corridor of cliff and water—and back I am in the gallery again among the Babyons. Then I may as well go home—they've got me then. A year or so goes by and I try to get away again. But you can't escape them—you can't escape my people. They'll inhabit anything to get at me—a face, a sound——"

"A tune?" said Nina.

His head dropped in his hands—

"Do you remember it—that tune? When I heard that I knew it was no use fighting. I was just as much alone, married. How could you help me? No-one could, no-one alive."

She was torn by jealousy as by birth-pangs.

"Who is it behind the curtain, Nicholas?"

"I don't know," said Nicholas.

"Is it your mother, Nicholas?"

"I don't know."

"Nicholas—did you—did you hope it might be me?"

"Yes," he said harshly: "For a little while I thought it might be you."

The tears were running down her cheeks.

"That was why——?"

"That was why, Nina."

She said, giving up for ever her youth as she said it—

"I'm glad you thought so, even for a little while."

They sat in silence, each hugging his own heaviness.

She ended it at last with—

"What now, Nicholas?" and he answered slowly, not looking at her—

"Whatever you choose, Nina."

She caught her breath. How often had he used that phrase to hurt her, how she had raged and chafed, how she had suffered from that smooth, unfriendly courtesy! Now at last he meant it. She might have what she chose so long as she did not choose anything that she wanted. Now she knew him defenceless, careless whether she saw or not how hopeless for himself he was and how filled with remorseful concern for her, her present and her future. She could feel him thinking of her as a nursery creature unfairly inveigled into sharing the troubles of maturity, and his thought of her touched and hurt her. She said—

"Nicholas, I am not thinking of what I choose. It's you I want to talk about."

But he continued his own thoughts—

"If I could undo this disastrous year—God, what I'ld give to undo it! What's the use of saying that? But, Nina, what can I do for you now? Anything you choose. What would you like? Would you like to go to your own people for a time? Would you like to be free? You're very young. You could forget all this and begin again. Wouldn't that be best for you, my dear, to be free of me?"

She was in such pain that her wits were not clear: she stumbled into—

"Free? I don't understand you."

"We could arrange a divorce. You could divorce me."

"Divorce?" Her face showed pure horror. She was a woman of the 'nineties and the mere word, trained as she was, thinking as she did, was a leprosy. Her fear of the word freed her utterance—"Divorce? Oh, Nicholas, you wouldn't, you couldn't divorce me? You couldn't be so cruel."

"You me—you would divorce me. But only if you wanted it."

"I don't want it," wailed Nina. "I don't want to be divorced. I don't want to be sent away from you." She caught at his hand—"Listen, Nicholas—dear, dear Nicholas—it's both our faults. D'you think I don't know that? That I don't know, don't understand, that if I'd been not so stupid, not so young, not so—just what I am—I could have been a much better Lady Babyon? Oh, I'm so ashamed of failing you."

He would not let her go on. He cried—

"You must stop, Nina! It's more than I can bear."

But she would not be stopped—

"Nicholas, you will have to have some one in the house. Why can't you let me stay? We can be quite strangers: we can arrange anything you want. But let me stay and do things in the house. You'll be so horribly lonely. You know, you would miss me, just as you'ld miss a fidgety noise when it stops. It would be so quiet here at Babyon, much worse than before. You do want me, you know, without knowing it, to disturb the quietness. Look, Nicholas, I'll have my own rooms and my own affairs, and I won't get in your way. But you must have some one in the house, and I do know your ways. I haven't managed so badly as all that."

He said to her—

"D'you mean that you want to stay with me—in spite of—in spite of——"

"Oh yes, oh yes!" cried his wife.

He said, his voice so low that, close as she was, she hardly caught his words—

"I don't understand you. But if you wish it——"

She cried out to him—"I do wish it!" with such passionate sincerity that for a moment his immobility was shaken. She moved him, and knew it, and had an instant pang of hope—'He feels for me: he feels something for me still—' as she listened while he continued—

"If you wish it we will try for a month or two. At any rate, you shall be as happy as——"

She said with the sudden flippancy that had always jarred him—

"As we can afford!"

But she did not jar him. He did perceive that her instinct was to make him smile. And to please her, and because he saw as she did a sort of humour in their bankrupt state, he smiled; but only for an instant. His face was the darker for the gleam, as he relapsed into silence; and as she watched him she felt again that the still air about them was rippled like a standing pool by inaudible clamours, as if his spirit cried to her again and again without his knowledge—"Help me!"

But the forced jest had left her, too, duller and more hopeless. She tasted bitterness like salt spray flung up from the sea in which she watched him struggle. She thought sullenly—'I can't help you. You have cut off my hands. How can I catch hold of you? I have only stumps left. You've severed from me my power to help you.'

Then she chided her own bitterness, saying to herself—'You pretend to love him, but all you can do is to think of your own miserable pain. Help him, you pitiful creature! What's your heart and your brain for, else?'

And even as she sat thinking these thoughts, with astonishment she heard herself saying aloud—

"Nicholas, didn't you get a letter the other day from Hugh Eype? Was it only a joke that he said he'ld have got you to go to Tunis with him if it hadn't been for me? Isn't he digging there next season? Why don't you go out to him for a month or two, Nicholas? I wish you would. I'ld like to be alone a little. You needn't mind leaving me with the Eypes so near. And, you see, after all this I'ld like to be alone for a little while. You see——"

But she had no need to elaborate lies. He caught eagerly at the straw she held out to him. Indeed, his relief eased

for the moment her misery. It was so blessed to contrive for him. It was so easy after all to help him. She wondered a little that he could believe her; but she knew that she was expressing a desire that must seem to him natural enough, a desire that he could understand and approve.

He did approve. How understandable it was that she should want to be alone, to be rid of him for a time! He liked her better for wanting to be alone than for wanting, once their relationship was severed, to remain in his house. Her clinging might touch him, but it also offended his knowledge of what a woman's pride should be. But then his poor Nina was such a child. However, she now said that she wanted to be alone: and that, of course, he could arrange for her. So much he could do for her at least. He would go away for a month or two and exhaust his own fever of humiliation and restlessness, and sleep the footsore sleep of physical exhaustion: and he had always wanted to go to Timgad with Hugh. He would cable Hugh and be off immediately. When it was time to come back the situation would have adjusted itself. A strange and artificial relationship would have to be built up: he hated the idea of it; but if this was what his Nina asked of him, then she must have it. She was his wife. 'A divorce? You couldn't be so cruel!' Her words rang in his ears like a call for help: and what help he could give her she should have—his poor Nina! Why should she suffer for his sins?

So he told her that he understood how she felt, and thought her plan the wisest possible in the circumstances: and said that he would fall in with it. And he gave her a cheque-book and his keys, and put her in authority over the agent, and wrote down his addresses and said that he would write whenever he could, and went away to Africa with his cousin, Hugh Eype. And whether it was the hard work, or the strong sunshine, or the deserts wide and rolling but never narrowing to river gorges or mountain corridors, he could not tell; but he left Babyon behind him in spirit as well as in body, as he had not before been able to do in any

of his wanderings: and slept soundly in his tent at nights, and did not dream.

XIII

But Antonina dreamed for two.

Because she had promised Nicholas she invited her aunt to stay with her, and so worked off a week of time with drives and walks and talks: and was comfortable except that she could not eat. In a fortnight she had grown as thin as a homeless cat, and her aunt was pleased with her because Sarah Bernhardt had set a thin fashion in London that spring, and Mrs. Drury was glad to see that Antonina had not lost her good taste and all her nice ways by burying herself in the country. For really her neighbours were excessively old-fashioned: especially Lady Eype, "who dresses, my dear, exactly like Fräulein! And as for her poor young daughter, I should have been ashamed to have let my girls be seen in such clothes even at the seaside. Look at her waist—twenty-eight inches at least! And how old is she? Twenty-three? Why, my dear, when I was twenty-three my waist was no bigger than a bed-post. I can prove it. I can show you the silver belt your uncle gave me when we were in Paris. It's exactly eighteen inches. Your uncle always said my waist-belts were other women's garters. Lady Eype is a poor sort of mother, I should say, for all her title. But you, Nina, I'm glad to see you growing sensible. With the baby and all I'd looked to find you had lost your figure altogether, let alone your hair; but you're thinning down nicely. You must be careful of your neck, though, my dear. Eva rubs hers with almond oil and rose-water morning and evening: I'll give you the receipt. You mustn't let your salt-cellars show."

Her aunt came and went. Antonina hardly knew when she came or when she went, but, alone in the house, she was forced to look about her for fresh occupation, and quickly.

"Thistles!" said Antonina, feverish for occupation. It was early in a wet summer, and the flat silver disks were everywhere. They reminded her of the mandragora that she and Nicholas had found on a Sicilian hillside, though the purple bells and orange fruits were missing. When she found the mandragora plant she had been absurdly joyous, so that Nicholas had wondered at her. He had been horrified to see her taste a maybe poisonous fruit, and made her throw it away half eaten. She had been too shy to tell him that mandrake brought a married woman luck. And indeed, shrieking mandrake had brought her Rachel's luck—Rachel, who wept in the end for the child the mandrakes brought her and would not be comforted. Stupid tales! What a fool, what a child and a fool she had been in far-off Sicily, tasting her mandrake, playing with life! Now she hated to see the silver disks disfiguring her barren fields, and set to work to exterminate them: and yet they could not be too many for her: she wanted an endless task. For she had not, consciously, let herself think or feel since Nicholas had gone. Her profound instinct was to dally, to mark time, to get her breath, to rest her spirit by day at least. She could get no rest for it by night. She dreamed like a lost soul at night.

She dreamed continuously, that is to say, of the earthly paradise, of a Babyon in which were her husband and child, alive, loving her, hers; though sometimes she woke in a dreary perplexity because the constant husband of her dreams was not entirely the Nicholas she knew. In her dreams Nicholas was often as young as herself; once he was her own lost child: then again they would be together in Sicily, picking mandragora, and her happiness would be ripe and sweet as the orange fruit, till, from the far town below them, bagpipes shrilled up through the blue air, and Nicholas changed under her eyes to a caricature, coarse, dark, violent in anger and in laughter. She worshipped and despised this shadow of Nicholas as she watched him tearing away the ivies from the mandragoras that grew, tall

as thistles, tall as trees, between them. She knew that he could never reach her without her help; but in those confused, bitter and unnatural dreams, she would not lift a finger to help him, though he called to her. Instead she cried out for help against him: and at her cry he would change in a flash to the young Nicholas and come to her through the trees and sit down by her on the trunk of a fallen tree. Then she was happy, till a bigger woman than she, a bold, laughing girl with an averted face, beckoned Nicholas from her side as she passed by. In the dream she watched them out of sight and called after them, then turning, would see that she was once more alone with the other Nicholas, coarse, dark, violent in anger and in laughter: and in her despair her despite of him would change to overwhelming pity for herself and for him, and so from the confusions of a dream she would wake to her cheerless day, hardly sure of her own identity. Once, indeed, she was awakened in the dead of night by her own despairing cry of "Charles!" Who was Charles? She knew no Charles. She turned on her pillow, weary of false dreams, helplessly enraged against the wantonness of dreams, wanting Nicholas: and so slept again, only to dream once more of the girl with the averted face who had stolen Nicholas from her in her dream, and in her dream she hated that stranger.

But waking she had the wisdom to be a machine, a health-getting, sleep-earning machine, weeding paths and digging thistles.

The new agent, happening upon Lady Babyon one morning digging thistles, her face set, took her for a practical eccentric, and cautiously revealed to her his difficulties over certain farms and certain tenants. Sir Nicholas had given instructions—lenience and consideration—but the leases were broken right and left. He was eloquent upon the difficulties of an overseer under a too lenient landlord, and took her to see gaping hedges, overstocked pastures and neglected meadows whose good grass choked under

crops of thistles and docks. And Antonina, walking over the Babyon farms with him, left little whirlpools of activity behind her and, incidentally, stirred up his activities also. Did she not support him, listen to his schemes without suggesting too many of her own? Had she not promised to write privately to Sir Nicholas?

She did write. It was her first letter to her husband since their breach, but she made no reference to it. She told him how bad the weather was, and that her aunt had now left her, and touched upon the agent's difficulties with Lewins, on the flood-broken salmon ladder at Upwater and the state of the docky field at Riverhayes. It appeared to her that Lewins was taking advantage of the absence of Nicholas and the agent's newness: it appeared to her that the new agent was afraid of outstepping his instructions, for which she liked him. The docky field was in a shocking state. She wished Nicholas had seen it. Might they be a little firm about the docky field with the farmer at Riverhayes who, as the agent reminded her, and she for what it was worth reminded Nicholas, had only been at Riverhayes four years?

She had a very kind letter from Nicholas, and a beautiful gold coin that he had picked up for a song: and he was glad to hear that the new man appeared to know his job and that she liked him. He enclosed a letter to him also, and they were, of course, to do as they thought best about the docky field and anything else. He did not think, unless she wanted him, that he would be home for some months: his cousin would be short of helpers when the digging began, and an extra white man was invaluable. If she would care to come out with Margaret instead, however, it could be arranged.

She read and re-read her letter, and wrote in answer that it all sounded very exciting, but that she did not think she would come out unless he particularly wanted her to come. They had taken steps about the docky field, and the ladder was being repaired.

He replied in a week or two; but he did not say any more about coming out. She enlarged her walks and was busy in the garden: and the new agent found her steady countenance a help to him in his struggles with an alien people: he was a Norfolk man. It was easier to pull a place together if you were countenanced, though not interfered with: and there was nothing much the matter at Babyon, only a general slackness. You had always to be after these valley people: centuries of warm wet weather and in-breeding told in the end. Sir Nicholas, of course, could not be expected to see it: Sir Nicholas, for that matter, was no better than his tenants—a little more important, but slack, slack, slack as the warm winter air, easy as the over-rich soil, yet stubborn, stubborn as the warm Devon seas that had just lifted away half the cliff foreshore beyond Queen's Tanleigh, restless as the winding river that would not stay two seasons in the same bed. Not an easy man to work for, Sir Nicholas, though pleasant and a gentleman. Give him Lady Babyon, who knew nothing and didn't mind showing it! He hoped Sir Nicholas would stay away long enough for him to turn necessary innovations into habits—

"Lady Babyon, if you can spare time one morning I'ld like you to see the damage at Tanleigh Cliff. I'm proposing to—but I'ld like you to see it."

"I'll come to-morrow—I'll come this morning."

"Oh, to-morrow's soon enough, Lady Babyon."

"Oh, no, Mr. Rogers, I'll come to-day."

Employment—she took to employment, incessant employment, as some women take to drugs. Anything was worth doing that kept her out of doors: she had not yet faced the house. She was up at five and came in at ten; only to sleep the dead sleep of physical fatigue: and so she kept out of the house: day by day she put off facing the house.

She had sent Nicholas out of its reach. She knew, instinctively, that she had secured him for a time against

the hungry house, but that a Babyon must be there to fill the empty place if he was to have a holiday: and she was Lady Babyon. So far she had been Lady Babyon in the gardens and fields and hangars: she had used her regency as an excuse for absence; but the excuse was wearing thin. The house was very patient but it would not wait for ever for its inmate. She did not form her impressions into thoughts expressible, but she did realise dimly that the house would refuse to remain empty for too long. If it were entirely deserted it would begin to call, and the call would be heard. It was a temptation to her to let it, as she knew it could, call home Nicholas; for she did not miss him the less cruelly because she had herself lost the power to call him home. And when, asleep, she called to him, the shadow 'Charles' came instead, begging her, she dreamed one night, to have her portrait painted to hang with the rest of the Babyons.

The dream was so vivid that it stayed with her long after she was awake, and she could not get it out of her head with her usual bouts of working and walking; for the morning skies were furious with rain, the fields drowned and dissolved in water. She thought—'I must do something. What shall I do?' Then, because the dream rambled in her mind, she said to herself—'It's a long while since I did any painting,' and began to remember her schooldays and her mornings in the Roman studio: and wondered where she had stowed away her paraphernalia, and thought it would be occupation to wash her brushes and clean her box, and perhaps make a sketch from the window of the picture gallery: she had always wanted to draw what Nicholas called the best picture in the room, the framed view of hills and sea. Something to do—it would be something to do.

She stretched and pasted a sheet of paper on her board, brought it along to the gallery with the rest of her outfit, pulled aside the writing-table to make an easel, and settled herself to work.

But the driving rain-clouds defeated her: they eddied, sank and lifted, and sank again, white shawls, upon fields and orchards: momentarily they altered the shape of the world. She could take a likeness; but Nina's landscape painting was of her period: she liked a still, copyable scene. She puddled and scrawled uncertainly for twenty minutes, and then turned from the window altogether. Her sketch was a failure.

The quiet Babyons on the walls were oddly solid and four-square pieces of painting, and when she looked up at them from her tentative record of the evanescence without, her dream came into her mind, and she nodded agreement with the shadow Charles.

"I ought to have my portrait painted," said Antonina whimsically. "I'm Lady Babyon. But it's all photographs nowadays. Well, I'll paint myself." And she began scrawling caricatures of herself on the half-dry paper. Then, glancing up at them as she sketched, she began to draw the Babyons too, because they were so still and copyable. She was interested to find, as she scribbled, how alike they were under the differences of dress and colouring. The height of the brow did not vary in any one of them. There was either the curious narrowing at the temple, the same short lip or the small mouth in each portrait. She thought that out of all their faces she could easily make a typical, a composite face—"I will draw a Babyon—any Babyon," said Nina, fascinated: and drew. The chalk pencil stubbed under her quick strokes, and the lines it made were soft, black and broad. High forehead, heavy brow, eager eyes, small mouth—'How like the face is growing to Nicholas!' she thought eagerly, and tried to make it still more like; but her pencil was too thick for her: it darkened and lengthened the hair, coarsened the lines of the cheek, and the eyelashes swept up in the look that Nicholas never wore, revealing an eye for a pretty woman. "How handsome he is!" cried Nina, talking to herself as usual. "Have I got in all of them—Hariot's forehead, Ludovic's mouth? The

chin is old Sir Jason's, and the eyelashes come from Isabella and Menella. What a mixture! All the women are in it: and yet it's such a man's face. If it were bearded——" Her pencil began darkening the line of the cheek, and she broke off with a cry of—"Charles!" for the touch of hair behind the cheek-bone had settled the likeness. The face resembled Nicholas—was not Nicholas. It was the face of the shadow Charles. Who could Charles be? A Babyon; but which Babyon?

She pushed back her chair and went down the long corridor and up again, checking the Babyon men—John, Jacoby, Endymion, Arthur, William, Jason, James, then Ludovic, then Henry: and so paused once more in the window by the portrait of her husband's mother. But where was her husband's father? The blue eyes of the portrait of the last Lady Babyon stared past her, and turning to follow that fixed glance, she saw upon the other wall, between the vast Medea and the red rep curtains of the window, the corner of a frame. She swept aside the massive hangings and saw for the first time the companion canvas to Lady Babyon and her children. She did not wonder that she should have overlooked it for so long, in spite of her close observance of all that made up Babyon, for it might purposely have been hustled into the dark corner, so curtained was it and hidden away. She thought it was no wonder, for it was a bad piece of work: a mere record of a Victorian gentleman, whiskered, immaculate, posed in front of the same red curtain and green landscape that she had for half the morning been trying to paint. The face was mere paint, dead. But the face was none the less the face of the shadow lying under her hand. Lettering in the picture set him out—'Sir Charles Babyon, 1840.'

So here was the father of Nicholas! He had been 'Father' on his son's lips. She had never heard his name: yet she had dreamed of him last night and known his name and loved and hated him: and had cried out against him for help to Nicholas, taken from her by a strange girl. Or was

the girl not so strange? In all the strangeness of her life, waking and dreaming, was she not the one familiar fact? Surely she knew her, the turn of her neck as she twisted that averted head, knew the set of the champagne-coloured voile, with the full sleeves, and full Edwardian skirt stiffened with wire. She had seen the figure—where? Where but in her own hand-glass trying on a new dress? "Does it set, aunt? Doesn't it wrinkle under the arm? It's so difficult to see oneself." She had seen herself in her dream, and felt an agony of jealous hatred for—herself!

"Then—then—some one has been using my mind!" cried Nina. "Who has been using my mind?" cried Nina. She swung round upon the dark corridor of Babyons and harangued them—"Which of you has been using me? You can't get at Nicholas, so you use me to live again a little while! I see—I see now—you've always done it. And she taught you!" She flung out a hand in accusation, pointing at the dim portrait by the door; for her brain was illumined: she saw all things: it was her turn to speak, and be heard and not answered. She cried to the Babyons, as her mind ran back to the night that had been their turn, not hers—"Are you sorry now that you took away my darling? When Nicholas and I are dead you will be sorry. You will have no-one to live in: you will have nowhere to go. There might have been another Babyon. But you—you frustrated—— Oh, cruel, cruel and mad! For now, when Nicholas and I are gone, you'll be lost for ever and ever in your dreadful corridor."

She stopped. Her breath came, shaking her: she was not herself. She had a moment's dizzy exultation at the plight of the helpless dead. Then, because she could not hate, because she had not in her that strength and weakness of the Babyons, pity took her instead and wrung her heart—"Oh, you poor souls!" cried Antonina, staring at the staring, dumb pictures.

Their known stories returned to her as if it were one

story: seeing them as a whole she understood them individually at last.

They would not, because they could not, leave Babyon. In no one of them would the spirit let itself be cheated of its flesh's due experience. Here at Babyon their lost loves and their lost lives had mortal continuance. In the body of Mary Anne, Hariot still strove for her rights against meek Menella: Charles must be punished and Nicholas pursued because forgotten Jamie had betrayed and twice escaped. And because she, Antonina, the alien, was the wife of a Babyon, she, too, must be pursued and punished by the repetition in her own life of the tragedy she had not helped to cause. Antonina nodded to herself, agreeing; for good and evil were plain sailing when you knew your Bible.

"The sins of the fathers——" said Antonina—"that's it! Visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate——" She broke off. "But I don't hate you," said Antonina, addressing the Lady Babyon she knew best. "How can I hate you? You put Nicholas into the world."

She examined the impassive face; her dream once more was upon her: and, weighing the vicarious suffering of the dream against her own waking grief, she found that they struck a balance. "What you feel, I feel," said Antonina to the picture—"mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, they needn't be enemies. Think of Ruth!" She laid hold of the frame as you would lay hold of a passive hand—"I understand how you feel: believe me, I do. And I think," said Antonina to the portrait, "that you loved Charles too, though you won't own it. Your husband and your baby, you've lost them both. I know how you feel. I've lost mine. Worse than yours, my loss: you had Nicholas. I never saw my baby. Oh, you needn't hate me so when you still have Nicholas! Even if I hated you I couldn't take him away from you. And I don't hate you. What he loves, I must love. I have to. I must." And then—"He doesn't love me—but he did—a little. So you should, a little. It would be

easier for us all—all three. It would warm the house for him. Oh, can't you see?"

She thought that such passion as hers ought to work a miracle: but the unyielding face would not live for her, not for a moment. She slipped into her chair again, and sat a long while watching it with eyes half closed, because the fringe of lashes about her sight softened the outlines of the sweet prim mask.

"For you're not like that," said Nina, watching. "You won't show me your real face, but you're not like that." The recollection of her husband's face and his troubled eyes rose in her mind. "If I painted you," said Antonina to the portrait, "I should draw your eyes from Nicholas."

Presently she took up a fresh mill-board and slowly and carefully, looking up at the portrait, she began to draw a face, though the day was clearing up at last and she might have gone out.

XIV

When he was ready, Nicholas came back to Babyon.

Only when his telegram was delivered and the flags had run up in her cheeks, did she let herself realise how heavy had been her fear that Nicholas would never come back: only then, in the ecstasy of her relief did she let herself dwell on the length and the darkness of the many months that separated them. But at last he was coming back to Babyon.

She let it be enough for her that he was coming. She would not distort the motive of his return nor let herself wonder if absence had tempered his attitude to her. Instead she satisfied her irrepressible delight at merely seeing him by filling the house with flowers, flowers, flowers, till every room was a garden. That done, her common sense came back to her and she spent a sober afternoon in taking away again all the achievements of her childish morning, and rubbing up the wet rings on the polished furniture;

for she was ashamed to show the maids that Lady Babyon could be careless. But so she quieted herself and was content with a bowl of Christmas roses in the parlour, on the dining-room table, and another in the picture gallery. There she had sat often of late, and from it she watched the departure of the carriage that was to fetch her husband from the station. She did not herself drive to meet him; but instead kept Margaret Eype with her: and talked quietly to Margaret, all the while saying to herself—'I must be quiet. I must be gentle. I must remember that he will not be glad to see me, that it's going to be difficult for both of us. I must make it as easy as I can for him—quiet—gentle—and I mustn't fuss.' And so Margaret, who had only driven over for an hour in the morning, had been kept, in spite of her protestations. Nicholas should have a friendly third in the house when he arrived.

Tea was brought to them where they sat in the window-seat.

Said Margaret, peering out into the spring as she drank—

"Do you remember how I brought you over to Babyon the first time, how you wanted to see the gallery? I never thought then you'ld be pouring out tea for me." She turned in her seat and looked about the room—"You've altered the place."

"I?" said Nina—"Oh, no! I could no more alter Babyon——"

"Oh, but you have. It used to be so cheerless." Her glance ran down the room to the doorway that leaped in the firelight from orange to gold.

"Oh, the curtains! The others got torn," said Nina in her suppressed voice. She was thinking of the time when the curtains got torn, and also thinking that she must expect the train to be late—better to expect the train to be late—you were the less disappointed. And then—"Nicholas sent home some beautiful stuffs. I used some of them."

She did not tell Margaret that some odd impulse to share her gifts from Nicholas had made her drag up the heavy stuffs and hang them in the gallery; but it had been so.

"Nicholas is awfully extravagant," said Margaret.

"Oh, I shouldn't call him extravagant," said Nina, who had been overwhelmed by the purchases of Nicholas, sent home to a crammed house, while the farms cried out for money. "Hark!"

"My dear Nina, he won't be here for hours. You know I really didn't mean to stay so long. I had much better be off."

"We'll send you back after dinner," said Antonina, dismissing the subject, while Margaret laughed.

"Very well, your ladyship! But I wouldn't have believed it!"

"Believed what?"

"That you could alter so—in the year. You're more of a Babyon than if you'd been born one."

Said Antonina pensively—

"I know what you mean. I lived fifteen years in Wimbledon and only one here; but I hardly remember my aunt's house. I couldn't tell you what my bedroom looked like any more. Odd, isn't it? But Babyon—I believe I know every pebble on the drive. You say I've made changes. You're wrong. I meant to, Margaret: I wanted to turn all the furniture about: I planned a rosary and a rockery. I was going to do—oh, great things." Her voice trailed away.

"I don't wonder," said Margaret. "What one could do here, with a free hand!"

"I don't want to any more."

"Nina," said Margaret.

"Yes?"

"I've always wondered——"

"What?"

"You'ld say, impertinent——"

"What have you wondered?"

"You were awfully in love, Nina. It was comical. You were always a darling headlong creature."

"Yes, I was awfully in love," said Nina.

"Well, I thought so. But Mother always said——"

"What did your mother say?"

"She said it was Babyon that you fell in love with."

Antonina looked at her in immense surprise.

"Oh no," said Antonina—"oh no! It was Nicholas."

"Well, Mother maintained——"

"Hark!" said Antonina.

"It's the carriage," said Margaret, and waited for an impetuous movement.

"Will you see," said Antonina from her chair, "who it is?"

Margaret stared at her. Then rising with a shrug which said 'How marriage changes people!' she pulled aside the curtains of the entry and let in the full noises of arrival. The voice of Nicholas rose from the hall.

"Where is Lady Babyon?"

"In the gallery, sir!"

"Will you come up?"

Then Margaret's joyful "Hugh!" announced that Nicholas had not come back alone. Antonina heard the voice close at hand—"Well, Margaret? Yes, I brought Hugh back with me," and the murmur of the brother and sister on the stair. She rose. Nicholas came in.

He was brown. He was well. They looked at each other uncertainly. Her heart said—'What change?' Then the pang of its instant death told her that she had nourished a folly of hope. He had not changed. But he was ill at ease.

"Well, Nina?"

"Well, Nicholas?"

He must be made comfortable.

"Did you have a good journey? I'm glad you brought back Hugh, for Margaret's here. Oh, of course, you saw her. Margaret, don't keep Hugh out in the cold! Well,

Hugh? How brown you are looking, both of you. Did you have a long wait at Salisbury? Milk first, isn't it, Hugh? You must both be wanting tea."

But if Nicholas had purposely brought home Hugh, and Antonina had purposely kept Margaret, the brother and sister defeated their hosts by going off together directly tea was over, because Lady Eype would never forgive them if they left her alone on the first evening. Nicholas and Antonina had no one to help them through dinner. But excitement and the strange death of expectation that she had felt at sight of her husband, combined to present to Nicholas a new Antonina. She said of him in her heart—'unchanged'; but watching her, he said—'changed!' She did not, by her difference, accentuate the familiarity of the house: she asked his attention as little as the familiar house: which made him watch her. He had not thought to find any creature as much a part of the house as she had become. He liked her dress. Oak panelling behind her and the brown velvet dress enhanced her white skin: her eyes caught light from the candles on the table between them. She had grown as quiet-mannered as the room. She no longer challenged him, nor strained their table-talk into a series of duels. Indeed, he found a certain pleasure, while he ate and drank, in listening to her, as she talked funnily of Lewins and young Rogers, of her walks and explorings, her marketings and repairs. He had dreaded having to sit down tired and embarrassed to chronicle his doings: instead she told him of her own, and with zest. What it was to be young! He envied her her power of recovery from an emotional experience that left him still exhausted: and he was glad, said Nicholas to himself, glad that she had made herself content.

Presently, heartened by his English dinner, and more at ease than he had thought possible, he began to talk in turn. When they went across into the white parlour he found that he had photographs to show her and treasures to unpack. He told her where each had been bought,

digged or bargained for. There were odd and interesting tales about each. She thought—'I never knew Nicholas could talk so fast! There is no-one like Nicholas!' She was happy listening. Tired as he had professed himself earlier in the evening, it was past two before they said good-night to each other and went to their rooms.

Next day he was silent again, busy with Rogers and the confusions of return. For a week she scarcely saw him save at meals, when he had a little to say, certainly, of Rogers and the new drainage, but no questions to ask and no look for her.

She hung about the rooms and garden restlessly for a day or two: then—"I must get something to do," said Antonina to herself, and went back to the gallery and her painting. She had worked intermittently at her copy of Mary Anne Babyon till it had become, in the lonely weeks, less a painting than a map of her own heart. Years later she had but to look at the finished sheet to remember every sensation and thought of those hours. She could recall what heavy mood had been upon her as she curved the lovely lines of the chin, how the emerald necklace had been a chain of empty days, how she had worked into the pattern of the lace the wording of a letter long delayed. She had gained knowledge of herself and control of her own spirit as she painted. She had fought battles and won them, with only the Babyons to watch her. In brush strokes she wrote down, as in a diary that none but she could read, her victories and defeats. More, she fancied, as she painted, that she had patched up a sort of peace with the original of her copy. She did not know, she could not be sure; but at any rate she had lost her fear of the gallery. She came and went without hesitation or a side glance at the quiet portraits, and wondered sometimes at her own ease. Perhaps, said she to herself, she was grown up and old at last: one had to be young to be afraid of the dark.

She wondered what she should do when her painting was

finished. Nicholas had come home, but he did not fill her empty days. Their bargain was to be held by, and they were to keep out of each other's way; indeed, he gave her no opportunity of keeping out of his way, so carefully did he keep out of hers.

She was actually thinking so and with a certain bitterness as he came in. But she had noticed in their life together that she never thought of him bitterly or with irritation but he did something to disarm that bitterness and shame her irritation, as if instinctively he would not let her misjudge him too much. Thus it was now. He put down a little bunch of violets on the table, white ones, dewy and sweet. She caught them up with an exclamation of pleasure—

"Nicholas, violets already? Where did you find them?"

"I came up through the lower wood. There's a patch still where I used to find them." He stood looking down at her: "It's a fine sunny morning. Why don't you go out? You look tired. You shouldn't stick indoors."

That, too, pleased her. She said hastily—

"I won't. I mean, I will. I did intend to go out. My eyes do get tired." She began shuffling her things together. She had not thought that he would see her work, but he came and looked over her shoulder: and then she stopped her packings and picked up her brush again and made to be busy with paint and water. He watched her. The room was quiet. Suddenly her hand began to shake and she gave up all pretence of continuing to paint.

"Do you like it?" said Antonina, impelled to break the silence.

"Yes," said he.

"I began sketching two or three of them. I got interested. I had nothing else to do. I used to paint. I——" She broke off. It seemed a space of time as long as his whole absence before he said—

"It's very like." And then—"Better than the thing you took it from. Much more like her."

"I'm glad," said Antonina.

"The hair wasn't so bright," said Nicholas.

"One shouldn't use white," she said, at once busy with the paints. "It's against all the rules. Still, it gets an effect," and her brush dulled and paled the golden hair. He watched without further comment. Presently she laid down her brush and pushed the picture from her, and stretched her stiff fingers—"I used to paint," said Antonina, on the defensive. "I can't paint well, but—I get a pleasure out of it." And this time she began to put her box together in earnest.

He took up the painting and looked at it. Then—

"For me?" said Nicholas.

She nodded.

He gave her a friendly look—

"What else have you done?"

"Only sketches. I used to copy at the galleries in Rome. I never thought I'ld have a gallery of my own."

"Let me see!"

She let him sort out her papers.

"Isabella's good. Isn't that my father? You do get a likeness. I didn't know you had this turn."

"I'll try you one day," said Antonina.

He laughed.

"Well, I can sit still, so long as you give me a book."

A silence fell upon them.

"I think I'm going out now," said Antonina at last.

"You should go out every day," said Nicholas. "Good for you!" and with that he went away, carrying his picture carefully.

She watched him go: and after his footsteps had ceased, still stood watching the curtains that had dropped into place behind him, till their patterns began to enlarge and shine and tremble like colours seen through steam: then—

"That's enough now!" said Antonina sharply.

She picked up the bunch of violets and tucked them in her dress. Then another thought came to her and, throw-

ing the paint water out of the window on to the ivy, she rubbed up the glass with the rag, filled it with water from the bowl of winter greenery on the table, shook in the bunch of violets and left the posy, small as it was, to fill the abandoned room with sweetness.

XV

Thus, oddly, between pauses, in snippets of intimacy, Nicholas Babyon and Antonina his wife resumed married life. The neighbourhood thought that they made a success of it—

"Nicholas seems to have settled down at last, Muriel."

"Yes, he's been home two years now—quite a fixture."

"Any talk of children?"

"Not since—she had a dreadful time."

"Poor woman! Oh, well, she's young. There's time still. How old is he?"

"Who? Nicholas? Fifty-two—fifty-three."

"Fifty, Mother!"

"Is he really? The same age as my husband. He doesn't look it."

"No, he looks younger than he did."

"I suppose she had money."

"Why?"

"They're doing all sorts of things on the estate; but I dare say that's Rogers. Rogers is enterprising, my husband says."

"I'm not so sure it isn't Nicholas himself. I always said he had capacity when he chose. It was the dancing off to Kamtchatka every six months—— However, she seems to have stopped all that."

"I like her, don't you?"

"Yes, I like her. Good-tempered."

"Somebody said to me that they didn't get on altogether."

"Don't believe it, my dear! I know Nicholas. She's exactly what he wants. No trouble to him and adores the place. And I must say she's done wonders, though it's difficult to say exactly what she's done; but——"

"I know what you mean. It used to be such a gloomy house. I dreaded the garden-party every summer. But now I'm glad to go when I'm asked."

"Yes: and it's nice for Margaret. Well, I confess I thought it a risk when they married—May and October. But on the whole it's turned out very well."

Such neighbourly comments reflected with sufficient accuracy, their lives. The situation which Nicholas had felt to be impossible had become a possible one. Within a year it was difficult for him to remember that there had ever been another relationship. He and his Nina had settled down: that was all: and this was the true married life.

He was surprised and grateful for quiet pleasures that he had not anticipated. One of them was his wife's development. It was strange and amusing to live, at his age, with a still growing creature. She was perpetually astonishing him by some shift of attitude, some recantation of opinion, some new discovery of an ancient truth. He envied her her gift of enjoying the detail of life. She never again inflicted upon him her own relations: and she was not a woman for quick friendships: nevertheless, they had plenty of good company. His godson, Hugh, liked her, and Hugh was a wise boy: if Nina agreed, here, one day, would be the heir. He was glad that Hugh and his friends and Margaret and her friends had lately made Babyon their halfway house. Nicholas himself, indeed, began to find it easier to ask down the old acquaintance of his gipsyings than to run up to town for club meetings. Antonina got on well with his Toms, Dicks, and Harrys: he approved of her way with them. Indeed, he grew to look forward to a table full of guests, to sitting at the head of it and seeing his wife's face glowing at him through the erections of flowers that

she would persist in huddling up between them. He liked the spates of talk and laughter: he liked the custom of trooping upstairs after dinner to the long gallery. His wife had discovered a blocked-up fireplace and shifted a picture or two so that it could be used: and a fire smouldered in it all the year round. He liked pacing up and down the clear space watching the group at the fire, outside the group yet of it. He would sentry-go, listening to the talk, watching the firelight flicker over the pictures, or turn to the window and watch for a while the deepening of dusk from lavender to purple, and the white owl beating across the fields, and the coming up of mist and the silver lifting of the moon, and so turn back into the cheerful gallery like a soul stepping back after death into life again.

He enjoyed, too, the comfortable reflection that his visitors were not a permanency: Antonina had a knack of knowing when the house had had visitors enough. Indeed, he believed that she enjoyed as much as he did the settling down of silence upon Babyon once more. She had her faults; but at least she was a woman who could be happy with a fire and a book, who felt, as he did, the beauty of peace and quiet. Peace and quiet—it was astonishing, after that first wrecking year of disillusionment and panic that there should be such peace and quiet left at Babyon to enjoy. For a time, indeed, he had been sure that it could only be another trap for him. He could not believe in happiness. And so he did not declare himself content, even to himself; but he did fear, as if it were a loss unbearable, the break-up of his peace and quiet through storms—a storm of restlessness in himself or of emotion in her. How long would Antonina let him be quiet? How long would his inner life let him have peace?

She too wondered—'How long will this last?'—with expectation rather than fear; but it was two years before they had any talk together of their mutual preoccupation; though there was little that passed through her surface mind that she did not convey to him, as they grew com-

fortable in each other's company; though he had learned to listen to her chatter with a certain pleasure, and to talk himself sometimes. He could hold her enchanted by dry chronicles of queer things seen in thirty years in queer corners of the world: and liked to do it.

"Oh, why don't you write them down?" cried Nina one night at the end of such a tale. He laughed. She put aside his humour impatiently—"No, but I mean it! Nicholas, make a book! You've all the stuff to make it with."

"Make it for me then," said Nicholas, still smiling at her. But she had not leisure to smile back at him.

"May I? Can I? Could I? Would you let me? Will you tell me things if I write them down? Nicholas, I believe I could do it. I don't ramble on paper."

He laughed again—

"My adventures wouldn't make a book. There's not enough of them."

She flamed out at him—

"Why only yours? Tell me that!"

"What?"

"If we want adventures let's begin before yours. Begin with Jane Babyon or Endymion—Hariot, and Jamie and Menella—there are boxes of letters in the safe. I've wanted to read them badly. Could we go through them? Nicholas, let's make a book about the Babyons!"

"You'ld like to? It would interest you?" He was oddly stirred.

"Interest? I should think it would. I'll do the writing down. You can sort and plan. There ought to be a record, and—" she hesitated—"don't you feel, Nicholas, that they'ld like it?"

His look said—'I know what you mean, but I won't own it!' He himself said—

"You're so fanciful."

With one of her accurate shots she broke open his defences—

"Oh, you know what I mean. They—the Babyons—

they haven't followed you round the world and back again for nothing. Nicholas, do you dream now?"

"No," he confessed unwillingly.

She leaned forward to him from her chair, her chin in her hands, so intimate, so sure of his interest, yet so undemanding of response that his panic at the long-dreaded invasion of his privacy was checked—

"Nicholas, I'll tell you a strange thing. I always meant to tell you one day. Nicholas, that night when I fell——"

"Don't, Nina!"

"It's past. It's over. It can be forgotten. But before we forget altogether, I must tell you. Nicholas, it happened like this——"

He listened while she told him the queer tale. It cost her an effort to tell him: she had a great fear of his mockery; but as she told, the terror and grief of the night returned, blanched her face and made her knees shake. When, ending, she looked up at him, she saw that his face, too, was white. She concluded—

"I wasn't asleep. I felt them. Nicholas, you do believe what I'm telling you?"

He said in his lowest voice—

"Anything's possible. I believe that you believe it."

"But you don't believe it?"

"It didn't happen to me, Nina."

"And so you think—dreams! But in your dreams—you told me so yourself—the Babyons catch at you. Can't you think that they'ld catch at anything they've missed? They haven't finished living, you see. They've got to finish living before they can go. Anger and hate they know—but they haven't tried the other side of living, so how can they get away? A person must be ready for the life to come. But—" her eager voice deadened—"you don't believe in a life to come."

Said he—

"I wouldn't say that."

"What?" she cried; for his definite disbeliefs had curi-

ously tormented her: then stopped herself to listen. He was saying—

"All reason is against it, I'll admit, but——"

"But what, Nicholas?"

"I say, 'but——?' Nina! How can any one be sure? I can't be sure. It's against reason, but——? I'm content to leave it there."

But she was remembering the time when he had been all reason, and she got the strangest comfort out of his 'but——?' She thought—'If he begins to feel about such a thing as I feel, then we're closer than we were.' He was continuing—

"But even so—where does it lead to? What would they gain?" He swept an arm about the room, but his eyes were on the picture by the window.

She hesitated—

"They weren't happy people, your people, were they?"

"Well?"

"Nicholas, I think they're hungry. I think if they ever saw—happiness—if they ever saw a Babyon happy, why then they'ld know the taste of it somehow, and be satisfied and go."

He said, smiling at her, seeing her as a child—

"So that's how you've thought it out." And then, as he looked at her, other aspects of her grew in his memory, and he said, hesitant—"Nina, are you happier again?"

For a moment she did not speak because she could not: she could not make the words come. Then she said—

"I miss you, Nicholas."

He had no answer to that. It was she who spoke again—

"But you? Are you happier nowadays?"

"Happy enough," said Nicholas.

They said no more to each other that evening; but as he held aside for her the curtains when she went away to her room, he put his arm round her for a moment. It lay lightly on her shoulder as a shadow, the shadow of a caress.

XVI

She went to bed rested, comforted, warmed. As soon as her head touched the pillow she fell asleep and woke only to find that day had come again in a burst of sunshine. Outside her window a head of myrtle shone in the pure light with so intense a glow that for a moment she did not know what it was. "I never saw anything so shining white," said Nina, enchanted. "It's ivory inlaid with gold. It's as white as the middle of a flame." At each stage of her dressing she had to hurry back to her window to look once more at the radiant myrtle buds. She had so little sense of what was truly valuable and valueless that she counted the dawn-drenched myrtle as one of the new joys that the past evening had foreshadowed. She could not wait till breakfast to see this comforting new Nicholas again, but she also wanted to tell him that myrtle buds, when the slanting morning light catches them, shine like candles.

But Nicholas was not in to breakfast: Nicholas had gone riding early and was not yet returned.

So easy up, so easy down—down sank her spirits! She thought—'Things never go on being delightful, not steadily. I suppose it would be bad for you if they did. Oh, I did want to see him so. It's absurd always to want to see him so. Oh, the sun's gone in!' For the intensely bright early sky had now begun to dull, and its warm leaden hue said that presently a storm would come up over the tablelands.

"Did Sir Nicholas say he'ld not be back?"

"No, my lady!"

"Then keep breakfast for him."

She went out into the hall, down the steps, and stood in the shadow of the porch peering along the drive. Why she should trouble she could not conceive, but uneasy she was. "Fool—just because the sun's gone in! It has to when it's fine early," said Antonina. "It's 'rain before seven' the other way round." And then she shivered sud-

denly because it was cold in the coffin-shaped shadow of the porch.

She moved out into the sunshine presently and, stooping to the borders, pulled up a few of the eternal, overwhelming weeds. She found that her new red veronica, so carefully lodged in a warm corner a month ago, was already starving for air in thickets of love-in-a-mist. She began to be ruthless, and the piles of greenery grew behind her as she moved along the towering, toppling, frothing corridor of bloom. She was a quick worker; but it was an hour before she came to an end of the flower-walk and left the garden for the drive. Still no Nicholas! She began to walk fast.

The roofs of the lodge were coming into view at the end of the rhododendron tunnel when she heard the sound of a horse's hooves coming down the drive behind her at a gallop. She turned and ran back a few paces, crying joyfully—"So there you are! Where have you been?"

Then she had a moment's wonder that Nicholas should have passed without seeing her or waking her from her gardener's absorption; for the horse and rider were galloping from the house. Nicholas must have returned another way, by the wood lane maybe, and ridden on to find her. She stepped out into the road and put out her hands, crying, "It's me, Nicholas! Don't go past! I'm here!" But the horse and rider tore by her and disappeared round the curve.

Annoyed and puzzled, and a trifle frightened, for she thought her husband should not be riding at such a pace, she ran on to the bend, crying, "Stop, Nicholas! Nicholas, do stop!" and then fell into a walk again, because the horse and rider were already out of sight. When she reached the lodge the great wrought-iron gates of the entrance were closed and barred, and she called to the lodge-keeper's wife, curtseying in the doorway—

"Why did you shut them again so quickly, Mrs. Ablett? Didn't you see me coming?"

The woman came out to her.

"They've been shut all morning, my lady!"

"You opened them just now for Sir Nicholas?"

"Sir Nicholas, 'e rode past three hours ago," said the woman stolidly.

"I mean just now," cried Antonina angrily: "You opened just now! Sir Nicholas went past just now!"

"No-one went past, my lady," said the lodge-keeper's wife. "Liddy's been sitting here shelling peas this hour and more, haven't you, Liddy?" and she turned to the pretty vacant child bobbing at her side.

"I tell you," said Antonina, "I saw him ride past me. If it wasn't Sir Nicholas, who rode past me? Where did he go? If the gates were locked how did he get through?"

"The gates were locked, my lady," said the woman, watching Antonina's face: and then, turning to her daughter—"Give her ladyship your stool, quick now, and get her a drink of water! Can't you see she's faintlike? There, my lady, sit you down, my dear!"

Said Antonina, rattling the iron gates as she held on to them, and speaking with extreme distinctness—

"Don't be foolish, Mrs. Ablett! Somebody rode past me just now—raced past me. I thought it was Sir Nicholas. You must have heard him go by."

The woman looked at her sideways—

. "Hear and see bain't the same, my lady. 'Ooves, was it? Galloping like? That's nothing to notice, my lady. That's Sir Jamie, like as not. 'E comes and 'e goes down the avenue. What look had 'e? Shadowy-like?"

Antonina sat down.

"I tell you it was Sir Nicholas," she said dizzily.

"Ah well, my lady, 'e'ld be bound to have a look of Sir Nicholas, with the master a Babyon twice over. Not that I've seed Sir James ever; though we 'ear him often in the dimpsies. Not by day though. It's queer 'im riding by day. But don't you trouble, my lady! There's things to most old houses. Where my sister was at work now——"

Antonina hardly heard her. She knew herself a fool to sit listening to the foolish lodge-keeper's wife. These country people with their long absurd histories and superstitions—you never knew where you were with them. They would so much rather be credulous of marvels that they made a wonder of anything out of their routine. She was quite sure that Nicholas had ridden past her five minutes ago upon a hurried errand, and that for some traditional reason Mrs. Ablett had shut the gates on him and would now rather lie than be found out in a custom of the years. All these country people lied to you when it suited them, though they liked you. What did it matter? But Nicholas mattered. What on earth had put Nicholas in such a panic of hurry? He was so careful of his horses. And why was he crossing the moor? She could not see him, even in the distance, for the moor road rose abruptly into the sky over a hilltop; but she could see for miles the ribboning valley road and there was no moving speck on that. So Nicholas must be heading into the storm that was gathering visibly on the hilltops beyond Queen's Tanleigh. Hark again!

"That rumble—is that thunder or a carriage?"

"That's thunder, my lady! You'd better be getting on 'ome, my dear. Or will you step inside?"

Yes, it was thunder that made her head spin, thunder in the air that gave her this sense of deflation and exhaustion, that reminded her—odd that she should think of it just now—of that torpor to which she had yielded once in the picture gallery at home when she had scribbled horrors in her sleep, and awakened stupid and exhausted. This time she would not yield.

"Mrs. Ablett, can you get in your pony? Is it in reach? I'ld be glad of a lift up the drive."

"'Tis on the common, my lady! Doll, run out and bring in Bess! I'll get the cart out directly. Sit you quiet, my lady! Liddy, find a cushion—the cushion in Father's chair. I'll put it on the seat."

She was certainly very tired. There was a tight band round her head. She was thankful for the rest on Liddy's stool and for the lift home; though she had to pay her fare in mechanical responses to the ceaseless flow of conversation. Mrs. Ablett had her opportunity and took it. Her health, her family's health, her husband's mother's health —Antonina put aside the racking headache to attend to these matters, and recommend remedies, and give the cool sympathy expected. Mrs. Ablett's husband was her main trouble. He had, she said, no pith in him.

"Sometimes I says to him, 'Jim, you'll go where your mother went if you're not careful.' You'll have 'eard tell of her, my lady? Ah, poor soul, she was going back."

"Back where?" said Antonina politely.

"Where? She was getting feeble, my dear! And the night afore old Lady Babyon died she went to the river, poor old soul!"

"To live by the river?"

"No, my lady, to drown 'erself. As I told 'ee afore, my lady, she enjoyed poor 'ealth—weak-headed as you might say, my husband's mother was. 'Tis the same with Liddy. Nothing wrong, my lady, but timid, poor little love. But Jim's mother she 'ad the lodge from 'er mother, and Sir Charles and my lady they never turned 'er out."

"But why should they?"

"Why, my lady, she was silly-like. My Jim's father, old Timon Ablett, 'e married 'er and were lodge-keeper till 'e died, and my Jim took it on, and old Ellen, she stayed too. Afore my time 'twas: I'm Jim's second. But one day old Lady Babyon fell ill and poor old Ellen she fretted and she pined, till off she went to the river."

"Poor thing!" said Antonina absently.

"Oh, it was queer, the way she went off—early morning it was: and Doll and Liddy, coming on from school, they saw her lying face down in the water. They never said nothing. After dinner Jim says to me—'Where be Mother to?' 'Out sticking,' I says to him. 'No, she i'n't,'

says Liddy: 'Granny's in the river—been there all morning, she 'ave.' 'Why didn't you say, then?' I says. 'You didn't ask me,' says Liddy. Children are queer—not to say a word to me! I couldn't 'ardly believe it. But when Jim went down, there she was, sure enough," finished Mrs. Ablett with profound satisfaction.

Antonina shivered.

"D'you know why she did it?" she asked with the interest convention demanded.

"Well, my lady, she 'ad a fancy for old Lady Babyon: and they do say she 'eard Sir James riding in the night and guessed her time were up. Wonderful fond of the old mistress, she was; though Lady Babyon never 'ad aught to say to her that I know of. But she'd never no pith, Jim's mother. And white-'earted folk take fancies. There, my lady! And we be just in time. See, 'tis raining."

They drew up in the doorway.

"I'm much obliged to you, Mrs. Ablett. The lift was very welcome. I think you're right—the storm is upsetting."

"Shall I mention it to Sir Nicholas, my lady, when 'e rides by, that you was looking for 'im?"

"Oh no, certainly not. I'm perfectly well." And down she jumped, feeling, indeed, perfectly well again as she nodded to the lodge-keeper's wife and went into the house.

XVII

THERE was disorder in the hall, doors flung wide, rugs askew, an overturned chair: a faint staccato of speech was audible behind the baize door that cut off the servants' offices from the main house. Antonina stood on the threshold of the confusion and began calling sharply to her servants.

Rogers, the agent, came hastily out of the parlour, her own parlour, saying—

"Come in here, please, Lady Babyon," in a voice of authority.

"What is it?" cried Antonina, half knowing.

"Please—not here. They want absolute quiet. I was coming down to meet you. No one knew where you were. Sir Nicholas——"

"Hurt?" She was at the door in one moment. He sprang after her and caught her by the elbow—

"Lady Babyon—you must not—forgive me!"

"I only want to go up to him."

"When they come for you, not yet. Scrupous and his partner are with him. Lucky to get them both. It's serious, Lady Babyon."

She turned back into the room, said calmly—

"What happened?"

"We were riding down the wood track to Riverhayes and came on a party of gipsy children. I'ld have headed them off, but Sir Nicholas wouldn't let me: said that half the gipsies in the county called cousin with him, and they were welcome to his blackberries. As we rode on one of the young devils flicked a pine cone after us and hit White Lady, startled her. Before I knew, she had thrown him."

"Clear?"

"That's it. She dragged him before I got level with her: got in among the trees. That did the damage."

She clutched at the table edge—

"He's not dead?"

"He was alive when we got him in," said Rogers.

She stood clutching and unclutching the smooth rounded edge. Presently she said courteously—

"D'you mind going into the hall to catch any one coming out of his room? Is he in his room?"

"We had him on a stretcher. We took him straight there. The stairs are so shallow."

"Will you do that then? Tell any one—I'm waiting."

"Certainly, Lady Babyon. Anything I can do." He was glad to escape.

She sat half an hour waiting before the doctor joined her

and strung out a list of injuries. "An operation? Not necessary. They wouldn't be serious injuries in a young man, but it's a question of shock. He's not a young man, Lady Babyon."

"Can I go up to him?"

"He's not conscious; but you can come up and sit by him."

She went up and sat by him. He was not much changed. She could not believe that he was badly hurt. Late in the day came Lady Eype with Hugh: she would not go down to them. The day wore into night, the night into a morning of rain. She had sat through the hours quietly watching him, her power to think and feel arrested by the shock, much as consciousness had been arrested in him. She observed the details of the room, and learnt the pattern of the paper. She noticed that the walnut chest had been covered with a cloth, and that a basin and litter of instruments lay on it. The glass and brushes and toilet bottles had been put down on the floor beside it untidily. Her eye wandered on round the room, past the mantelpiece where hung the ugly Madonna, the battered masterless primitive that Nicholas had found in Venice—then came a college group: then, in the alcove by the curtained door, he had hung her timid water-colour of Mary Anne. Yes, he had framed it and hung it beside the stiff photograph of herself in her wedding-dress. He had hung the two together. Her calm broke up and she began to cry noiselessly. Presently the doctor came across the room to her—

"Lady Babyon, you must rest for an hour or two."

At that she controlled herself:

"I'm not tired. Really I'm not tired."

"If you rest now for an hour you will be fresher for to-morrow."

She caught at the word—'to-morrow.' He could not have idly and cruelly said to her 'to-morrow.' Here was hope. She rose instantly, docile.

"I will go across to the gallery. That will be closest. You will call me if I am wanted?"

"Of course."

She went across to the gallery and took the food the maid brought her, and lay back in the deep chair to rest because that was the wise thing to do, but she could not sleep. She had had the curtains of the doorway fastened back so that she could command the entire length of the corridor, the staircase, the hall, and now that she was ordered to rest she became all ears, a creature without personality, a mere conductor and receiver of sounds and sensations. Not the creak of a board escaped her: her own breath distracted her by its noisiness: the artillery of the rain without shook her nerves to pieces.

'Rain, rain, go to Spain;
Go and don't come back again!'

Oh, unlucky verse! Once let Nicholas go and he would not come back again: other Babyons came back again with the rain; but not Nicholas. He would not be sorry, as they were, to go. He had always loved a journey to a new country. He had never wanted to come back. If life said to him—"Go, and don't come back again," he, of all the Babyons, would obey.

But how could she let him go? Now, when they were beginning to be happy; for now she saw, in spite of all her griefs, how happy she had been. If to face the loss of him was such agony, then how happy, how happy she had been! She saw their mutual life lying at her feet like a map, every thought, every feeling, every understanding and misunderstanding clear to read. She perceived with amazement that since their first meeting she had idly tormented herself and him. She had been happy, in possession of the whole, yet had spent her time bargaining for the parts. "Give me so much and I'll give you so much!" How pitifully and meanly she had chaffered for the small coin of

happiness when he had already given her his whole treasure in giving her the power to love. If he went from her now, if he went to join his dead, taking from her the power to love because she had not valued it enough, what should she do? Go to the river like crazy Ellen? Shoot herself and be done with it like wretched Jamie, only to become a wanderer like Jamie, who went and then came back again? To run from life, that was the sin of the Babyons which had brought from generation to generation its own punishment. They had not known, poor souls, that to run away from life was to run away from happiness also. But she knew better. She must never forget that she knew better. If Nicholas died would she not still have her happiness? Living or dead, could anything stop her loving him? Had life or death stopped the Babyons from their hating? What then should stop her from loving him?

Hark! What was that? She started up and hurried down the room to the open entry. And she had, in that tense moment, the sensation that the whole room moved with her, that she trailed after her the quivering charged air of the gallery, as if she were the arrow-head of an eagerness that sought, as she did, for what it loved.

She met the doctor at the head of the stairs.

"He's asked for you. Come at once!"

"Conscious?"

"Yes, he spoke. He said, 'Call Lady Babyon!'"

"Thank God!" She hurried down the corridor. She reached the door of his room, opened it and, holding aside the curtain that masked it, hesitated on the threshold.

Nicholas had moved in the bed, his head was turned towards her, though his eyes were closed. He was still not much changed. At the faint jangle of the curtain rings he opened his eyes and looked at her—

"Dearest!" said Nicholas in a voice of surprise and delight.

His eyes closed again. His head slipped a little on his pillow. She ran to him.

"Be careful, Lady Babyon!" warned the doctor, entering behind her; but his partner frowned. He said under his breath—

"What does it matter now? Don't bother her now."

XVIII

What with the lawyers and undertakers, and funeral baked meats, and connections to console, and ready money to lay hands on, death, Antonina found, was as worry-breeding a business as living. Nor did death, she also found, end any one's responsibilities. She had thought that it concerned herself solely if Nicholas had gone never to come back again; but she found that the villages looked forward to the funeral of Sir Nicholas, and must not be cheated. She gave them a fine sober entertainment, and they spoke well of Nicholas and mourned for him, and discussed with sympathetic curiosity the future of his widow. This curiosity was not confined to the villages.

"She'll marry again, of course," said Lady Eype, as they drove home after the funeral and the reading of the will. "She's young." She eyed thoughtfully her Hugh, who would have a long time to wait for his inheritance unless he and the young widow should—why not?—become better friends than they were already. Lady Eype had always liked Antonina.

"I don't think she will myself," said Hugh, who understood his mother, quickly.

"I'm perfectly certain she won't," said his sister.

"At any rate, Margaret," said Lady Eype, more hastily than usual, "we needn't discuss it now. I am sure I was very fond of Nicholas."

Margaret and Hugh exchanged glances; though they often disliked her, they admired their impregnable mother.

Antonina was vaguely aware of the eyes upon her, but they did not trouble her. She was affectionate by letter

with Lovisa, affectionate at meeting with Margaret and Lady Eype, and thankful to Hugh for helping her through that miserable sordid half week, and thought all the time—'When the funeral is over and I get rid of them, I can think. Let me get through all this work; then I can think.'

With her guests gone and her black dress changed with a shudder for a natural kindly garment, with tea ordered to please her servants, and kind, stammering Rogers sent home, at last she had the house to herself. She wandered about it, drawing up the blinds and letting in the sunshine. She went to her husband's room and opened the windows and tidied a few of his things. She thought—'He can't be gone. I'm dreaming. He can't be gone.' The maid knocked at the door to tell her tea was ready, and meek to any suggestion she went away to the gallery, to sit in the window and drink her tea and wonder what was to become of her. Her youth was a burden to her in that hour. "I shall live to be eighty," said Nina, "all alone here. Oh, Nicholas, how shall I get through it?"

She could not see that ten years would get her through it. How should she conceive a greater war than the Great Boer War of her yesterday? She could not see that in ten years there would be a gap on the wall where Isabella now hung, nor guess that the sale of glittering Isabella would pay for turning Babyon into a hospital, or that the good organiser, Lady Babyon, would allow influenza and over-work to confuse her plans, just when she was wanted, just when every bed was full. She could not foresee her own scrambling and unnoticed death in a world of death.

But she thought to herself—'I think too much of my troubles. Nicholas had years alone. And so did she——' for she was looking up as usual at the portrait of Mary Anne.

"At least I've been happy. Yes, I'm happy," said Antonina, and looked again at the portrait with a furtive triumph. "He said 'Dearest!' to me," said Antonina.

And then, in the silence—

"What is that? What do you mean? He said it to me."

A summer air, jasmine-laden, stirred the window curtains, fanned her cheek. She shrank from it as from a blow and looked round at all the Babyons, crying woefully—"It was to me? Wasn't it to me?" and lived again, in memory, the dead-and-gone chief minutes of her life, ran down the corridor, opened the door, put aside the curtain. Nicholas had looked at her. "Dearest!" said Nicholas. At whom had he looked if not at her? What had accompanied her? What face, what form, no longer hidden behind the curtain, had he seen?

"I thought he meant me," said Antonina, her lip quivering. "If he didn't mean me," said Antonina to the portrait—"why then—then——"

His face rose in her mind as she had seen it, smiling with such surprise and welcoming delight.

What did it matter? What he had seen had made him happy. She forced her spirit, wrenched it to her will, and suddenly she had not to force it any more.

"I don't mind," said Antonina to the portrait. "You or me, what does it matter? I love you both."

She lay back in her chair. She was very tired. She should have gone to her room to lie down, but the gallery was too peaceful to leave and she had it to herself. She thought that it was silly of the Babyons to have abandoned it: they would never find any room so full of peace and quiet. She would miss the Babyons. How dully painted their pictures hung upon the walls, all life gone out of them! She was glad that there was no picture of Nicholas. It was better to have him safe in her own mind. His face rose in her mind and looked at her, smiling, peaceful and quiet.

Peace and quiet—there was peace at Babyon.

She fell asleep.

THE END

June 1926—*September* 1927.